

# Phoenix Soaring

Mark Pasquini



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# Phoenix Soaring

By Mark Pasquini

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# Prologue

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Summer 2051

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*A lot has happened lately. We have actually reconstituted the United States of America. We had a Constitutional Convention and we did it!!!!!!!!!!*

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*I was a delegate for Jefferson, along with Robert Agnello, Doc White, Gail O'Malley and Jim Robertson. The other states being represented were California (the old Bear Flag Republic), Humboldt (northern California, southern coast of Oregon), Oregon (Portland area), Madison (South-east Oregon, North-east California), Washington (Puget Sound), Columbia (Eastern Washington), Palo Duro (Panhandle of Texas and Western Oklahoma), Kansas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Taos (Northern New Mexico). As observers there was Missouri, Tennessee, Texas, the Sioux Confederation (Northern Plains), Deseret (Northern Utah, Southern Idaho), Colorado (the Southwest corner of Colorado and South Utah), New Africa (West of Lake Superior to the Sioux) and the Aztec Empire (Northern Mexico, Southern New Mexico/Arizona, Texas along the Rio Grande).*

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*After the opening speeches and the taking of the roll, the revised Constitution was read. This was the one that we had developed in Jefferson when it was just Mitchell. There was a lot of argument about the dearth of Cabinet Posts, just State, Justice, Defense and Treasury.*

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*After the overbearing Federal Government we had just before the Collapse, you would think they would have been happy to have the size of government curtailed. Things were going hot and heavy about Education, Commerce, Agricultural and the rest, but Robert Agnello made a speech that brought it into perspective, at least for me.*

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*“We know about the three branches of the Federal Government, the Legislative, the Executive and the Judicial. That is grammar school learning. What we do not learn in school, because it is an argument on the limiting of the Federal system, is the three Levels of Power.*

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*“The levels of Power are the People, the States and the Federal Government. The power of the Federal Government is generally outward looking: statecraft with other powers and defense against enemies foreign and domestic, trade. Its inward looking provenance is assuring that the laws of the*

land are evenly applied to all and that states do not pass legislation contrary to the Constitution and that there is uniformity in commercial dealings, not control of those dealing, but assurance of equal application to all states by all states and the Federal Government.

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*“The power of the State is to oversee the welfare of its people. Pass laws for and by them. Powers much like the Federal Powers, but on a local level and complementary to the Constitution. We saw how social experimentation was taken from the states and forced on the old United States by the Federal Government. Turmoil and division followed. Outside of its Constitution Powers, the Federal Government had, and should not have, any say in the desires of the citizens of the individual states. As an example, Jefferson has allowed bigamy, but Kansas has not. Those who do not approve of the practice can move to Kansas and those who do can move to Jefferson. Neither state would demand their practice to be country-wide.*

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*“The third level of power is the most critical and should be the most powerful: the People. Their will, when lawfully enacted, is the source of the State and Federal powers and can be taken or modified or added to at their will and within the framework of the Constitution.*

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*“The division of these powers is not equal and should not be. The people should wield 85%, the states some 10% and the Federal Government 5% of the inward focusing of this power. The Federal Government, of course, wields 100% of the outward focusing power with the consent of the representatives of the People.*

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*“That, Ladies and Gentlemen, is the reason for the sparse number of Cabinet posts. Education, Commerce, Agriculture, Labor and all the other concerns are under the control of the State or the People and should eternally remain there.”*

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*That is the gist, if not the actual wording. I never articulated that before, but now that Robert said it, it was like coming home.*

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*Anyway, that pretty much limited the debate on the power of the Feds. What a surprising bone of contention was the change made from “pursuit of happiness” to “property”, like it was originally written. A lot of us were ready to give in on something so trivial, but a representative from Columbia made a case and it was left alone.*

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Another sticky point was a monetary system. No one wanted the runaway inflation of the 2020's. We decided on a labor based system, since that was the important factor now. Precious metals and gems and any other of the old currency backers were fairly useless to us except as jewelry. The Feds would pay its bills with money appropriated as in the early days of the Republic. The States would have to come up with the cash based on population. The nuts and bolts were a little tedious and sometimes confusing, but we got it passed. That meant the old 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment was gone. No IRS!!! It would be up to the States how they collected it from its citizens.

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Term limits came up, but was passed almost unanimously. We did not want a profession political class again. Period.

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The discussion about the Electoral College was another convoluted and intense session. We finally passed it as it originally stood, though the arguments presented were a little archaic. I voted for it because it seemed to be inclusive of the states with smaller population.

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When we got into committees, I was on Defense. Fighting was something I could understand. It was more of a bull session. There was little that was going to change. It would remain a militia system, with each state fielding a number of troops based on their population. In times of trouble, they would be under the command of the President and Secretary of Defense. There would be no Federal troops except for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> US who would act as police and honor guards in Gunnison, which was adopted as the Federal Capitol and not part of any State, sort of like Washington, D.C. There was a provision that three more Federal Troops could be raised if passed by the states by a two-thirds majority. The troops were sent from the states for a six-month stint and maintained by the states.

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What got straightened out was the identification of units. Each state would number its own units. The designation would be the number, name of the state, and the type of unit (Troop, Ranger, Auxiliary, Reserves, Cavalry, etc.) Texas got a little put out about not being able to call their Troops, Texas Rangers and their Rangers, Scouts.

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Of course, once a rule is made, there start to be exceptions. Seeing as how it was no big deal as long as they could fight, we let them have their way. So, now, instead of One Troop, it was 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Troop and 2<sup>nd</sup> Taos

*Rangers and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee Cavalry.*

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*By the end, we were ready to go home. But we did it. The United States of America, with thirteen States and a promise of application from Tennessee is reborn.*

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*On the way home somebody suggested that I run for office, but I declared myself out. I quoted some general, Sherman or Sheridan, after the War Between the States who said “If nominated, I will not run. If elected, I will not serve.” I have enough going with the Ranch to ever want to leave it again.*

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# Chapter 1

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## News from Tennessee

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*Spring 2052*

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*Almost a year since my last entry. I must be leading a wonderfully boring life.*

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*Gunnison has been contacted by Tennessee. They finally made a formal application and have been accepted as the fourteenth state to join the new United States.*

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*I suppose I should expand on that a little.*

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*I have reread the journals I kept in the past and to bring everything up to date, the Aztecs collapsed into civil war and have pretty much knocked themselves back to the tribal level. This opened the way to take Albuquerque and Santa Fe, the whole southern half of old New Mexico. Taos has taken the lead in colonizing them. The local population of Albuquerque was more than happy to throw out the despot King Juan I and join the United States. There is even talk of crossing the Rio Grande and setting up outposts. California has reclaimed their southern territories and raised the flag over Baja California and the northern gulf area. They are talking about clearing some old channel from the Gulf of California to the Salton Sea, but that would be a pretty big operation and kill a lot of great farmland in the Mexicali and Imperial Valleys, though it might give Arizona a seashore, for what's that worth. Speaking of Arizona, Colorado put in a claim for the southern part. If it sticks, then the state of Colorado would form a crescent from Durango, around the Pueblo lands, through New Mexico and into Arizona. Taos will have a lot to say about that, I'm sure.*

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*The Texans from the Lake Texana and East Texas areas spread into Corpus Cristi and San Antonio and formed the Republic of Texas. They just joined the NUS last year as a Commonwealth member, whatever that means. Palo Duro, wanting to get a coastal fishing and trading center going, sent a colony to Galveston. There have been some rumblings lately from Texas about this, but nothing serious. I imagine that we are going to have to do something about it later.*

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*We also have set up trading centers in El Paso, Shiprock and Memphis. The trade with Mexico is sporadic, but there is a growing exchange of goods between the Navaho/Hopi and Shiprock. We use the Memphis enclave to keep an eye on the Missouri reavers under John Benson and the Mahdists. Kentucky is making a big effort to organize and we have taken in troopers to train and have sent out medical and educational teams to help with whatever, same as with all potential states.*

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*The reaver problem has degenerated into small bands which everyone, even Missouri, is hoping to eradicate. The reason Missouri is hot to smash them is that the last two large enclaves are on their border. They are suffering attacks since the reavers themselves don't want to mess with the NUS. Surprisingly, those reaver groups that have taken over territory have pretty much settled down and are organizing 'civilized' feifdoms.*

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*New Africa and the Caliphate finally beat each other into exhausted submission and have concluded a peace. Jeremy Potter and his faction finally took over running NA. Michael, Kestrel and their cronies got too bloody and oppressive and the rest took matters into their own hands. The final straw was when the Peace Commissioners from the Caliphate were beheaded and the heads sent back to New Mecca.*

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*We, as the government of the United States, also made peace with the Caliphate and NA. Peace was breaking out all over.*

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*The Californians have formed a deep-water navy and a flotilla (some refitted coast guard cutters and large sailboats) sailed to Hawaii via the coast of Mexico. The islands were relatively untouched by the bombs, but the plagues were pretty bad and they had had a hard time. There was a colony of Japanese on Maui and the Hawaiians weren't too happy to see the Californians. The little contact was more a warning to leave them alone. They don't want anything to do with the United States and have declared the Kingdom of Hawaii.*

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*Other than that, there have been a few natural disasters to cope with. Mount Rainier in Washington blew and pretty much destroyed the remainder of Seattle. The ash cloud blew south of the population centers, except for the Olympic Peninsula, but most of people got off and moved inland. I was really proud of how every other state sent aide. The good side of nature is that the*



*radio interference is lessening year-by-year and long range communications is again possible. 'Long-range' being a relative term. Next week we will get an official delegation from Tennessee to participate in a ceremony to commemorate their joining the United States. Our governor, Correy Snyder, has asked the senior advisors to join him in Gunnison. Sarah and the kids, the Appletons, Henrietta and her brood and a couple of troops will be escorting Leo Appleton, Karl and me down. Carl has decided to stick around; says his back is still bothering him from the fall he had last year.*

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Zach was trying to get the children settled into the vans. It seemed no sooner had he gotten the door closed than someone had to go to the bathroom, get something precious left behind or just walk around. He finally got them all in their seats and breathed a sigh of relief.

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With his own brood, Karl's and the Appleton's, the thirty seats were almost full. What had started as a simple trip to Gunnison with Leo, Karl and the Appleton boys had turned into a mob scene. First, William wanted to come, then the rest of the Banducci crowd. When the refusals came and the tears started to flow, Sarah offered to come and watch the children. That meant, Elizabeth Acosta, was also included.

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Karl's kids insisted on going if Zach's kids went. That included Henrietta to watch them. That meant a bigger vehicle and more room, so Sarah called Cathy Appleton to invite her. Cathy had a flare-up of arthritis and decided not to, but Daniel, Jason and Gregg's wives wanted to come and bring their kids. Hence, the thirty-passenger mini-bus and the original twelve-passenger van were needed.

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Sarah had finally sent the frustrated Zach inside to pack and the older children helped with the loading of luggage, weapons, food and refreshments. When she went in to find him, Zach was writing in the journal, his equipment by the door.

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"Zach, come on," she called from the front door. "We'll be late."

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Her husband bit his tongue on the obvious retort and joined them.

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He climbed into the driver's seat and started the bus. When Ed complained about his twin crowding him, Zach twisted around and threatened, "It is not too late to unpack you and leave you here. One more word and I will dump you out and let the bears have you."

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Eduardo and Anne Montoya and Ed Young and his wives, Kay and Mary, waved good-bye, laughing. Zach was still amazed at how lucky they were to have the couples as partners. The Montoyas had both been slaves of the Aztecs that had been repatriated. Sarah had hired them while Zach was out with an expedition and they had become part of the family. Ed was a vet trainee who had caught the fancy of the two nannies at The Ranch and had stayed on after the wedding.

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An hour later, they pulled into Mitchell where the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Troop and 4<sup>th</sup> Jefferson Rangers were waiting at the barracks. With strict orders to remain in the vehicles, Zach and Leo exited to greet the troop leaders and get final instructions from Carl.

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Five minutes later they were heading for the Front Gate to the echoes of well-wishers. The vehicles were equipped with the Singleton Converter which was used to power the engines. Unfortunately, they had not figured out how to generate much horsepower and the speed was only around thirty miles per hour for the loaded bus and van. Two trucks, sporting machine guns, were more agile since they weighed much less. With the mounted troopers, the caravan was limited to the speed of the slowest group, anyway.

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“Good thing speed is not a factor,” said Leo.

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“Yeah,” returned Zach. “We left in plenty of time, though I imagine that there will be a lot of rest stops.”

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The prophecy of his words was soon born out when one of the kids threatened to get sick. Though Zach complained, he enjoyed the leisurely trip down the eastern side of the Rockies. They stopped early to sight-see or camp. Often times, William rode with the Troopers and declared that on his fifteenth birthday he was going to join up.

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They finally arrived in Gunnison on a bright spring afternoon. The Capitol had grown with the melding of the states into the new United States. The building boom had seen new official buildings to house the branches of government; hotels, restaurants and entertainment venues and residences for the semi-permanent residents.

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“Zach, you didn’t tell me how much everything had changed” said Sarah, when they had been shown their rooms in the new hotel.

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“There has been a lot of building, but, remember, I haven’t been around here

much in the last year or so. Most of my communication has been long-distance.

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“Now look, I have to go see President Callahan and his staff for some preliminary discussions about Tennessee and whatever. Will you and the mob be alright for a couple of hours?”

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“No, we are such helpless females that we won’t be able to do a thing by ourselves, without a big strong man around to help,” she simpered, clasping her hands to her breasts and fluttering her eyelashes.

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“Okay, then just stay in the rooms until I get back and I will take you poor, helpless females in hand,” Zach returned, playing along. He barely made it out of the room ahead of the barrage of pillows.

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The official signings the next day were held in the Presidential Office, with full ceremony and speeches by all parties. The two Senators and four Representatives for Tennessee were sworn in by the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House. The representatives from the Tennessee capitol in Jackson were handed a fourteen-star American Flag. After the signing ceremony, a banquet was held for the invited guests while the President, Paul Gaynor of Tennessee and the advisory council met privately.

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“Well, gentlemen,” said John Callahan, tugging off his necktie, “that is going to start it, I think. Next comes Colorado/Durango, Texas and Kentucky.” Troopers passed around drinks and sandwiches while they settled around the conference table. “Paul, you have something to say?”

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“First, thanks for the welcome and it is good to be part of the United States again.”

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A chorus of “Amen” interrupted him.

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“Second, I think you are right; Kentucky will be joining us soon. Third, we have sent several troops to look over Alabama, eastern Tennessee, Georgia to the coast, the Carolinas and the Blue Ridge Mountains. Jackson said that we have lost communications with all of them. We expected that when they hit the mountains, but not all three.”

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“Just the troops, Paul?” asked Karl.

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“The conversation I had with Jackson indicated that they wanted to send out rangers to track them down. I agreed, but we really don’t have the troops to

commit piecemeal like this.”

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Zach washed his sandwich down with a swallow of the local beer and asked, “Just what do you want us to do? I gather from the fact it has been brought up here that you want the Federal Government to get involved.”

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Gaynor took a long time to finish his sip of whiskey and wipe his lips on a napkin. He carefully folded and set aside the cloth and scratched his chin.

“Yes, Zach. I am asking for help. There aren’t a lot of us in Tennessee and we have lost or committed over half of our forces. We cannot send anyone else out, either to find the missing troops or complete their mission.”

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“No matter how quiet Missouri is, we do have them across the river and they may decide to pull some raids if they know we are helpless. The Durrant reavers are being held in check now between Benson’s government and ours, but they have raided into southern Illinois and it wouldn’t take much show of weakness to open up Kentucky and Tennessee to their incursions. I know that we can count on you to support us, but that could take weeks and a lot of damage could be done in that amount of time.”

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Robert Agnello had been scribbling on a pad of paper and looked up when Paul finished. The Secretary of State slid the pad to Karl. “For the rest of you, that is a rough map of the old United States. I have circled the areas of probable radiation, like Denver. On the East Coast, that doesn’t leave much available. Paul, are you sure that the troops aren’t just having to meander around those spots?”

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“No, they had radios and communicated for the first week with no trouble and we have a detailed record of their actual and planned routes.”

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Zach beckoned one of the troopers over and instructed him to bring a map of the United States. He turned back and said, “Let’s get a more accurate picture of the situation. No offense, Bob, but my youngest can draw better than you.”

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The trooper returned amid general laughter and the maps were spread out. He also put a box of colored markers on the table before he withdrew. The map had been sandwiched between two sheets of clear, rigid plastic. The danger zones had been marked already, along with the settled boundaries between states and those areas claimed by the Sioux, Mormons, New Africans, Mahdists and Missouri.

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Karl nudged the markers to Paul in a silent question. Extracting one, Gaynor

drew a green line south from Jackson to Hamilton, Alabama through Corinth, Mississippi down US-45 and I-22. “1<sup>st</sup> Tennessee Cavalry, three supply wagons and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee Rangers reported every evening until they got here, to Fulton. Since that time, we have not heard a word. We aren’t sure about what is going on, but it has taken them a long time to get to the Alabama border. Captain Carpenter gives only vague reasons, but he hasn’t used the code word for being under duress.”

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A second mark was draw east from Jackson to Nashville, along I40. “This is the route 4<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Troop, three supply wagons and the 1<sup>st</sup> Squad of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee Rangers followed. From Nashville, they were to head north on I65 to Bowling Green where they were to meet a troop from Kentucky. The combined group was to explore east to the coast. We lost track of them when they entered the mountains. Kentucky hasn’t heard from anyone in their troop, either.

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“The last troop, 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee Troop and supply wagons, was to head straight east through Pulaski and break for Chattanooga. From there they were to head around Atlanta to the south and head for the coast at Savanna. We lost track of them the night they entered Dalton, Georgia.”

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Zach hunched over the map, doing some measuring. “Paul, the arch covered at the disappearance points is hundreds of miles long. I don’t see how this could be a single, related set of incidents. The kind of coordination it would require would need radios and troop movements all over the place. The trading station in Memphis has automatic monitoring of all bands, both VHF and UHF, 24-7.”

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“Zach is right,” reinforced Karl. “This must be a bad coincidence, all three troops missing at the same time.”

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President Callahan raised a hand to still the discussion, “Karl, this is your realm, along with Zach and Leo. Why don’t you meet with Al Black in the morning and work something out. Paul, I imagine you can speak for Tennessee?”

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At the Tennessean’s nod, he continued, “Tonight, let us join the festivities and tomorrow get to work on the problem.”

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The next morning, after Mrs. Callahan had picked up the visiting families, Zach, Leo and Karl met with the United States War Council and Paul Gaynor.

After the situation had been explained and the Council brought up to speed, the floor was thrown open.

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Leo stood up and tapped the map pinned to the cork wall. "I did some thinking last night. I don't like the coincidence theory. Two, maybe. Three groups and it goes out the window."

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"However, if there was no coincidence, then the only explanation is a conspiracy. Someone who is trying to weaken Tennessee knew where almost half her forces would be and when. Paul, I take it this was no secret mission and that the details were general knowledge?"

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At Paul's nod, he continued, "So, word gets sent out, forces are assembled across the lines of march and, bang, ambush. Bury the bodies and cover the traces. No one the wiser and a mystery never solved."

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Al shook his head. "That doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Maybe everyone knew about the expeditions, but everybody knew that Tennessee was joining the New United States, too. Any attack on Tennessee would mean a massive retaliation against whomsoever was responsible."

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Karl tipped his chair forward. "Maybe that is just what this whoever wants. Think of it. We would be pulling troops from the whole east slope country. From Palo Duro up to Mitchell, maybe from the West Coast, too. On something like this, I would recommend on the side of caution and take a few more troops than normal, especially if I was chasing a force identified as originating in the Southeast or East Coast regions."

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"Call me nuts, but let's say there are attacks against outlying Tennessee settlements or farms, maybe Louisiana, too. They leave a trail towards, say, Florida. We go hieing off with a large portion of our forces chasing ghosts. Meanwhile, the real threat hits Gunnison or Mitchell, Seldon or Lake Texana."

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"Come on, Karl," Emilio Santo scoffed. "Then what? The rest would rally and beat the crap out of them. If there was a force big enough to take and hold what you are suggesting, we would spot them a long ways off or we would hear about any attacks in time to get ready."

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"No, Emilio, I don't think so. We know that communications goes out all the time. The scientists say it has to do with sunspots or something in the atmosphere. Singleton has even predicted them to within a couple of days."

And they don't have to hold," continued Karl. He went to the map and stabbed at several locations. "Nail the Arkansawyers at Benton, the Texans at Lake Texana, Gunnison and you have cut the U.S. in two on this side of the mountains. The chaos would be huge. From here, they could head for Taos, south for Palo Duro, north for Mitchell or east to Seldon. Ten troops, living off the land, ready to sacrifice themselves and I could disrupt us to the point of collapse."

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Hans Minkema drawled, "Sounds like the Mahdists, to me."

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This brought a silent pause to the room. The Caliphate had recently made their peace with New Africa and was probably rebuilding its forces and, if it were expanding, the only direction left to them was East. From eastern Nebraska, through Iowa, northern Illinois and into Indiana, they held sway. A move to the East Coast would cut off New England and the Mid-Atlantic to form a huge base of operations. He continued, "They failed in cutting the United States off North-to-South, maybe they are conceding the South and aiming to whack off the Northeast for themselves."

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"Alright," interjected Zach. "The first thing we have to do is determine what IS going on. Is it the Mahdists, some other, single force or really random coincidences? Personally, I am going with the scariest one and prepare for the worst." He rose and went to the map. "Paul, I am assuming that someone in your government is in cahoots with this outside, single force and is reporting all movements to them."

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The big Tennessean half-rose in protest, but Karl put a large paw on his shoulder and pulled him back into his seat.

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Zach nodded his thanks and continued, "No offense, Paul. There could be spies here, too. We need to get a small force of Rangers into Tennessee and beyond, in secret. They have to find out what happened to your three expeditions, who did for them, contact the Tennessee forces and get back with all the information necessary for a quick and surgical lancing of this particular boil.

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"Leo. I think this is Louisiana all over again. Instead of one team, we need three. Got any ideas?"

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"Well, my boys are still the best or right up there at the top. Since this op is deeper into enemy territory, I would suggest six-man teams, a squad of

Rangers each.”

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He rubbed his close-cropped hair before he went on, “Gregg to take his third squad south to Alabama. He is the most cautious and will go slow and thorough. The first under Dan through Bowling Green. Faster than Gregg, but analytical. That will be the roughest trip, in terms of terrain.

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“The last group, the second squad, under Jimmy Gunderson, with Jason as second in command. Jimmy can keep Jason on a tight leash, they respect each other. Jason is the best woodsman, but he has a tendency to see himself as immortal. He would charge Hell with a bucket of water where Jimmy would stand back and use a fire hose.”

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“Thanks, Leo,” said Al Black. “Get me a list of who their teams will consist of, equipment and such.

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“Since we don’t know what kind of spies we have floating around, I want to get them there in plain sight. There is going to be a delegation sent to Tennessee to welcome them into the fold. Don’t look surprised, Paul, this has been long planned for; at least, two or three minutes. We will be escorted by three Troops and two Ranger Troops. From Jackson, after suitable ceremony, we will head north to Kentucky to try and convince them of the benefits of joining. Somewhere along the way, the teams will be scouting and simply fade away, hopefully unnoticed.

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“If there are no more questions, I will inform the President of the long-standing diplomatic mission we just made up and we can start preparations.”

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## Chapter 2

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### Trip to Jackson

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*Spring 2052*

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*This 'diplomatic mission' has turned into a real circus. First, the families want to come along, again. We managed to send the youngest back with Carrie and Toni Stemple, their latest nannies, until some young buck comes along and we lose them, too. Paul Gaynor wants to set it up to use some of his troops, too, but he was voted down since we have no idea who is feeding information. That is, if anyone is. Maybe we will find his missing troops all back at Jackson.*

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*We sent a radio message to Palo Duro to have Ishtar Singh join us for the ceremony. In fact, we sent messages to Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana and Seldon, too. Al Black wants to have a lot of firepower around if this gets messy. After the radio messages, we dispatched riders to let all of the State governments know what was going on and asking the ones on the east slope to filter troops across the Mississippi. We are on board with three troops from Mitchell in the official party and three more assigned by Gunnison. The troops from Mitchell and surrounding areas will meet up with Seldon and form up around New Jerusalem, ready to strike south or cut off anything from the Caliphate. This will look like a show of force aimed at the Mahdists, I hope.*

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*Karl is worried that the number of troops that will be traipsing around will alert whoever is involved, but my opinion is that I would rather tip them off than have small groups chopped up piecemeal or not have any troops in the field when they are needed.*

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The caravan started out three days later. Robert Agnello had a formal letter of welcome, the official flag with their star added and a fancy copy of the Federal Constitution of the new United States. With buses, trucks, wagons, troopers and livestock, the train was several miles long and Karl spent most of his time trying to keep it together.

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Two nights out, the camp was visited by the Shorts. The old man looked like

he had when Zach first met him a decade earlier. He was still spry enough to ride and his appetite had not seemed to slacken over the years.

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Karl greeted the six riders with obvious joy. He had always liked the old Cherokee. He invited them to the fire and laid additional steaks on the grill from the freshly killed beef. They ate and talked of the weather, cattle, farming and other mundane topics. When the coffee had washed down the last of the meal, John Short invited Karl and Zach to stroll down by the river to, as he put it ‘start up the digestion.’

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“You boys have something going on,” he said as they moved beyond earshot of the camp.

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“What do you mean?” Zach asked with a sinking feeling.

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The old man stopped, rolled and lit a cigarette and rubbed out the match with his toe before continuing. “I am not just some ignorant savage, you know. There have been reports of riders coming out of Gunnison. Seems you are contacting everyone on the eastern slope.”

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He ticked off his fingers, “Two to Mitchell, two to Seldon, two to Palo Duro, two more towards the Texans and, probably, beyond to the Cajuns. You even sent one towards Arkansas and you are going to be there in a week or so, yourselves. That says something is going on and it is big, I’ll bet.”

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Karl looked at Zach sharply. They had not sent anyone East. They wanted to tell the Arkansawyers on the way to Tennessee.

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“The rider going East. When did you see him?”

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John scratched under the crown of his hat and looked at the sliver of moon, thinking. “Two nights ago. The spotter thought it was odd you sending him like that.”

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Karl gave the Cherokee an odd look. “A couple of things, John. What did this rider look like and why are you keeping an eye on us, anyway?”

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The old man let out a chuckle that turned into a hacking cough. One of his nephews stepped out with a canteen, waited for his uncle to drink and faded back into the trees.

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“Damn, I have to give up smoking one of these days. We always keep track of what is going on around here. The boys know that when Jefferson gets excited, there is an opportunity for fun and loot.”

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The other two men knew that there was more to the story, but were positive they would not get anything more out of the old man unless he wanted to talk. They walked to the edge of the water and idly threw stones into the river, watching the splash points drift downstream with the current.

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Occasionally, the old Indian would look right and left at the other two. Finally, he shook his head and observed, “You are getting so I couldn’t cheat you out of everything you owned on a horse trade anymore. Learned some patience in your old age, huh?”

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Karl snorted. “Old man, the only reason you have your hair and teeth is because I don’t want them.”

---

After a bark of laughter, John moved to a rock and sat. He rolled another cigarette and started, “We’ve noticed that there has been a rider through this neck of the woods for the last few months. Always at night and always avoiding the roads. Now, we know you have radios, you gave us one a while back, so it wouldn’t be normal messages unless there was some secret you didn’t want generally known.

---

“We didn’t hear anything from you, so we got to wondering. It looked like something was up, but nothing happened. Usually, when you guys get cagey, there’s a big fight goin’ ta happen. Like when you went after those nut-cases across the Mississippi or the time you ambushed Red and his merry band of bandits.

---

“This time, nothing. So, when you came down out of the hills, I decided that it would be nice to know if things have changed between us.”

---

Zach and Karl were thunderstruck. Both men were at a loss for words.

---

Karl got over his astonishment first. “What?! You think... What? You think we are going to jump you? What?”

---

The old Cherokee slapped his knee and went into another coughing jag, augmented by bursts of laughter. When he managed to get himself under control, he said, “I guess not. Unless you two are the best actors in the world, I guess not.”

---

He stood, waved his arms and shouted, “Go home. Everything is fine. Just a misunderstanding.” Shadows moved among the trees for a minute.

---

Zach looked at John with one eyebrow quirked. “What? You were going to

start a war? By wiping us out?"

---

Wiping the tears of mirth from his eyes, John answered, "Seemed like a good idea at the time. We know we couldn't win, but we could damage you some. By the time your people figured what was going on, we might have found some friends."

---

"Like the Sioux or the Missourians?"

---

"Oh, we had those plans, but we also would have given ourselves a chance to reverse the Trail of Tears and head back to Georgia or somewhere across the Mississippi. We didn't know ourselves."

---

"So what is going on?"

---

Zach and Karl walked out of the Cherokee's hearing and discussed the ramifications of what they had heard. Neither man wanted to believe that there were spies in their midst, but the evidence pointed that way. Zach remembered the hanging of Wade Hampton; he didn't want to go through that again.

---

"We are kind of over a barrel here," said Karl, finally. "I figure that we have to let him in on it and ask him real nice not to talk of it. You know John; he gets curious and he will scratch that itch until he is satisfied. I don't want him to grab this mysterious rider and 'tickle' it out of him like he did with those reavers of Skull's."

---

"Yeah, you're right, Karl. We need to get this cleaned up quick or everybody but us will know what is going on."

---

They returned to the riverside and told the complete story to John. He agreed to keep quiet about it and offered to lend a few of his young men to shadow the expedition and look for anyone trailing them. "You can't show too much interest in your own back trail, since this little caravan is just to welcome the Tennesseans and have a ceremony. If you show too much suspicion, they might get the wind up and screw everything up."

---

Karl agreed and went to get several of the stones outfitted with tracking signals and a receiver in order to communicate with the Cherokee, if necessary. While he was gone, Zach asked John why he thought the reconstructed United States would want to attack the Cherokee.

---

"We are right in the middle of your reconstructed U.S. No offense, but we are

not too anxious to join up. The Sioux, Deseret, New Africa, the Pueblos and the Caliphate are all on your borders. We are plunk in the middle of everything, except the roads West and between Seldon and Mitchell. It'd only be logical to, shall we say, forcibly recruit us."

---

"Makes sense," Zach answered. "Except, of course, that you are allies and we don't have the people to fill up what we have AND we are trying to get Kentucky and the rest of the old states across the Mississippi before someone else does. Most importantly, though, is that you are our allies and as long as me and mine are alive, we will fight any attempt to 'recruit' you."

---

The old man gazed at Zach for a few minutes. "I know you would, but people change and you are not in charge anymore. It wouldn't be your decision, would it?"

---

"The decision to haul my sorry butt down here and play Alamo would."

---

Karl returned and interrupted the conversation. He had outlined the plan to the troop leaders, John Agnello and Paul Gaynor. They agreed, more because they had no choice than because they liked the idea.

---

The next morning, equipment was packed and they were on the road by sunup. A light screen of rangers preceded and flanked the column. The radio operator kept an eye on the receiver, looking for a signal from the Cherokee shadowing them.

---

They stopped outside of Shawnee one evening and met the mayor. Also camped was 'Buster' Johnson and the 1<sup>st</sup> Arkansas Rangers. While they were visiting, they asked about any activity in the area; the movement of large numbers of men, in particular. The mayor of Shawnee was surprised their scout had not reported the lack of the news.

---

"When did this scout come through?" asked 'Buster' Johnson.

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"Why, night 'fore last night. Rode through, oh, about moondrop. Stopped for a bite and a fresh horse. His had throwed a shoe, I said we would fix it. Wouldn't abide, just rode on," answered Norman Stock, a wizened man with a weathered face, his heritage obvious in the high cheekbones and Roman nose.

---

"Did he have identification on him?"

---

"Why, sure 'nough," the older man answered, spitting out a bit of straw from

the stem he was chewing. “Why, he had himself a metal card, engraved with a message, something like, ‘Member of the State of Jefferson Rangers. Please render all assistance.’ It had a engraved signature of the Governor, too, and some number in front of ‘Rangers’. I looked at his dogtags, too.”

---

“What name?”

---

“Why, I don’t recollect the name, but the tags were official enough. I still got my granddads tags and medals in a box, somewhere ‘round here.”

---

“Can you show me the horse he rode in on?”

---

“Why, sure. It’s sitting in that field over there, was put there after the blacksmith put a new shoe on,” the mayor answered, pointing to a pasture on the edge of the woods. “Why, ain’t that odd? It’s gone. I saw it just about can-see. The rising sun shone on its black coat, I remarked on how shiny it was to Mother. That horse that’s there is the one he swapped for.”

---

When the troops were out of sight of the town the next morning, ‘Buster’ ordered the 1<sup>st</sup> Arkansas Rangers to try and track down the animal. He warned them to keep out of sight and if anybody saw them and got curious, just to tell them that they were looking for strays. The Rangers returned without having found the animal. It had been led away, but they lost the tracks in some rocks.

---

“Took some guts to stop like that,” commented Hans.

---

“Not really,” answered the Arkansawyer. “We have standing requests to the towns that if anyone on official business needs aid, help and send the bill to Benton. Most of the towns just think it is neighborly to feed someone or swap horses and we never hear anything about it.

---

“Seems we need to tighten up the rules, a little. Though I don’t think anyone will take it seriously, unless we tell them what’s up and we can’t do that.”

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Their arrival in Benton was a signal for a round of celebrations. Paul Gaynor, Zach, Robert Agnello, Leo and Karl and their families attended a state dinner where Josh Martin, the governor of Arkansas, welcomed Tennessee to the United States. They unfurled their flag with the added star over the capitol before the speeches began in the state banquet hall. The rest of the caravan was hosted by the city fathers to a barbeque in the city park.

---

After the ceremonies, Josh and Bobby John ‘Buster’ Johnson, head of the

Arkansas Defense Council met with the Jefferson and Tennessee representatives. The situation with the Tennessee expeditions was explained in careful detail. Bobby John agreed to send two Troops to join the escort to Tennessee. "I'll send my oldest. You met him 'Buster' Junior."

---

The trip was delayed for a week to give time for the official contingents to be assembled in Benton. The families and troopers spent the time sight-seeing and renewing acquaintances. There were friendly baseball games and daily picnics. The leaders spent their time organizing the scouts and giving the leaders their instructions. Jason showed poor grace about not leading his party, but, when his father threatened to yank him off the team, he settled down

---

A fresh round of celebrations was organized for every contingent which arrived. The troopers were sent off to enjoy themselves. When they all had arrived, the leaders were briefed. Each sent a rider back to their respective capitols with a detailed plan of where they were to stage their troops when, and if, an alert came.

---

A routine patrol picked up a message rock from the Cherokee. It reported that no one had followed the caravan into Benton, but that a rider had arrived at Fort Smith and immediately rode back west the day after. The scouts also informed them that they were heading for home and wished them luck.

---

Finally, on a bright, clear morning, the much enlarged caravan set out. There were the original contingent from Gunnison; the Tennesseans; one troop with the Texans; two troops and a ranger troop from Palo Duro; a troop and a ranger troop from Louisiana; a troop from Kansas; two troops and a ranger troop from Mississippi and a troop and a ranger troop from Arkansas. A final total was two hundred and forty troopers, fifty rangers and forty-two civilians, including delegates, women and children. Some of the older boys, who were too young to join the regular troops, formed themselves into a troop which the rest dubbed the 'RT' Troop, for Rag-Tag. Karl took them in hand with strict and dire warnings about getting involved in any fighting other than the defense of the caravan.

---

With all of the additional troops, a much wider and tighter ring of scouts was maintained. Radio traffic to the capitols was normal, mentioning day-to-day activities and the training missions to meld the troops into a single unit. This

gave the troops a reason for random maneuvers around the march and camps. The delegates hoped this would keep any prying eyes back for fear of being caught up in a training sweep.

---

The Arkansas contingent stopped at settlements which had been set up or absorbed by the state for news of any activity in the area, but everyone reported that, other than occasional run-ins with reaver bands, everything had been peaceful.

---

The remainder of the trip to Jackson was uneventful. They met a scouting party out of Memphis, who told them that the Tennessee troops were still missing. They were warned to be on the lookout for lone riders, as they were possible spies, but left it at that.

---

They crossed the Mississippi the next day and spent the night in Memphis. They ended the next march at Brownsville. Then center of town had been rebuilt and a small farming community was thriving. Paul sent the Tennessee troops off with instructions to report that the delegates would be arriving around noon the next day.

---

Morning dawned bright and clear. Everyone broke out their dress uniforms and best clothes. Sarah had a brisk argument with Zach, Charlie and William about neckties. In the end, with poor grace, they acceded to her insistence. Lizzie Acosta was separated from her beloved overalls and into a light blue dress with a prim, white collar. When Sarah had all of her 'savages' dressed and had given them dire warnings about dirt and wrinkles, she disappeared into the washroom for a shower and to change. Zach only got a stern look and frown when he offered to scrub her back. He turned to his laughing offspring and had his own serious talk about their appearance and he gave them a choice on whether to stay neat or give themselves over to him for punishment. He finished with his usual 'your choice'. The children knew that phrase meant he was serious and his end of the choice was going to be very unpleasant. The three youngsters exchanged glances and Zach knew they would be properly turned out when Sarah finished dressing.

---

The four went with Zach in search of the Mitchell contingent. They found the troopers in a hotel near the Memphis Blues Museum. Karl and Hans had just formed the Jefferson Troops up for inspection. More than a few pairs of eyes stared wide-eyed at Lizzie. Very few had ever seen her in a dress before and



she blushed and edged behind Zach until a snarl from Karl brought them back to eyes front.

---

The Troopers wore dark blue jackets with silver buttons over homespun, gray shirts and gray trousers. Their boots were black leather polished to a high sheen. A pale blue stripe ran down the outside of each trouser leg. The non-commissioned officers wore pale blue insignia on their sleeves. All had black slouch hats. A silver unit number held the left brim pinned to the crown. Their leather belts were new and creaked with each movement.

---

On the other side of the room, the Rangers were in formation. Their dress uniforms were dark green shirts over dark brown pants tucked into high-topped, leather moccasins. Their headgear consisted of a small round cap, without brim. On the front was embroidered their unit number in brown thread. The insignia were dark brown. Their belts were made of butter-soft brown leather.

---

As Hans was turning away from the Rangers, Daniel commented out of the side of his mouth to Gregg Appleton, "The only time we put these things on is for a parade. They wouldn't stand up to a three-month patrol."

---

Hans whipped around with a hard grin on his face. He walked up to the suddenly ramrod stiff Ranger. "You are wearing those because I don't want you slovenly pigs to embarrass me. If I let you dress in your every day uniforms, and I use the term 'uniforms' very, very loosely, the citizens of the great state of Tennessee would think you were a gang of ragpickers on hard times.

---

"So, you will dress like gentlemen. You will act like gentlemen. And, for a short period in your miserable lives, you will be gentlemen. I hope I have made myself perfectly clear? Any breach of etiquette and you will wish that you had never been born." He paused. "And then I will really start in on you."

---

As he turned, he winked at Lizzie, who giggled into her hand. He walked up to her and offered her his arm, "Miss, may I have the pleasure of escorting you?"

---

She executed a smart curtsy, thanked him and laid her fingertips on the extended forearm. Hans escorted her out the door, the Rangers simpering and grossly imitating his offer to each other.

---

They made a brave show, riding into Jackson later that day. Each troop rode

in formation with guidons and pennons flying. The Tennesseans rode first, their uniforms a butternut color with yellow sashes and insignia. They were followed by the Jefferson contingent. Each contingent dipped their pennants to the viewing platform which consisted of the dignitaries from each state and their parties. The Louisianans passed in gray uniforms and red shirts and sashes, kepis with red neck cloths slanted on their heads, the Mississippi Tigers wore pale gray coats, dark gray pants and a black-and-orange neckerchief, topped with orange berets sitting rakishly on their heads, Texans were proud in their fringed leather jackets and pants and covered with a brightly striped serape, heads sporting wide-brimmed Stetson-style hats. The Palo Duro troops were dressed in white shirts and pants with black insignia and black turbans with the unit designation in gold on the front. The Aarkansawyers wore a desert camouflage and black leather, with accents and insignia of dark green. The last group to pass was the troops from Kansas. They had similar uniforms to Jefferson, but sported a bright green sash under their belts.

---

When the last troop had paraded, the governor of Tennessee, a round-faced, smiling woman stood and welcomed the visitors. She extolled the virtues of being, once again, a part of the greatest country on earth. When the cheers and whistles had died down, she continued with her remarks, often being interrupted by the crowd's demonstrations of approval. The ceremony ended when Robert Agnello, as the representative of the United States, presented the document welcoming Tennessee into the Union and a flag with Tennessee's star included.

---

As the crowd broke up, Sarah laughingly gave permission for Zach and the children to change. "However, I don't get a chance to dress up and I kind of like it."

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Surprisingly, Lizzie decided not to change, either. Zach glanced over at the troopers in their uniforms and said, "I guess, 'Lizzie' is going to be changed to 'Young Lady Elizabeth' now." He gave her a hug and whispered, "Don't grow up too soon, love."

---

The celebrations lasted well into the night. Jackson opened its arms wide to the visitors and showered them with food and drink. When Robert Agnello suggested to Governor Isabella Mitchell that she and her cabinet meet with the delegates from the other states for a briefing, she scolded him.

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“Mr. Agnello, my people have been wound tight over these disappearances and tonight is their chance to forget all of that until tomorrow. If folks see me and the cabinet going off with you, it will put a damper on things like you wouldn’t believe.”

---

“Let’s hold this off until the morning and we will get it all sorted out.”

---

Zach and Karl looked at each other and shrugged. There was an unspoken statement that Governor Mitchell’s cavalier attitude was hiding something. The nagging thought was eventually lost in the eating, dancing and drinking and Zach’s efforts to nonchalantly keep an eye on Lizzie and her current dancing partner.

---

His wife finally had to haul him off, protesting, to bed. “She will be just fine, if you would just leave her alone. With you going around glowering like a bear with a sore tooth, you are scaring off the boys.”

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“Good,” he muttered as he allowed himself to be led off.

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## Chapter 3

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### The Scouting Parties – Gregg

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*Spring 2052*

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*Lizzie didn't come in until after midnight. Sarah tried to keep me in bed and, by the time I managed to get up, was so tangled in the sheets that I tripped and smacked my head. Sarah sat on me until it was too late to speak to my charge. Note: the bed is better than the floor for certain activities.*

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*Karl seems to agree with me that the governor is being cute about something. She didn't want to talk about the missing troops, just party. Hopefully, we'll get some answers today. If not, I will talk to Agnello about picking up our marbles and going home. If they need help, let's get on with it, if not let's go to Kentucky and then head for home. There's plenty of work to do at The Ranch for everybody.*

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*Finally, the mob is ready. Time to eat and get organized.*

---

William hung back with his brother and whispered to Zach, "We kept an eye on her, dad."

---

Pretending not to know what they were talking about, he replied, "What do you mean? Who?"

---

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Come ON, dad. You looked like you were having kittens last night."

---

"Yeah, or was it a coincidence that you were always on the same side of the hall as Lizzie when she was dancing?"

---

"All right. All right," he surrendered. Nonchalantly, he added, "How close an eye?"

---

"Close enough to get glared at. She did try and sneak away from us, but Uncle Leo was out on the balcony smoking, so she came back in. We had help, too. When one of those Mississippi Tigers tried to get her off into a corner one of our boys cut in. She sure does look different in a dress."

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William supported his brother, "Yeah, a lot different."

---

Zach brightened and thanked his sons for looking out for their surrogate sister.

All the time he thought, “Too damn good different.”

---

They joined the ladies for breakfast and Zach interpreted the warning look from Sarah and did not mention anything specific about Lizzie and the previous evening.

---

After eating, Sarah took the children in hand and mentioned shopping. Zach pulled out a wad of U.S. Trade Currency he had converted with his personal notes before leaving. Once again, he made a mental note to talk to Bill Downs, Commissary Chief, about a monetary system. The old one based on everyone creating his or her own personal notes was getting stretched thin, with all of the other states and organizations. They were getting a little too big for barter. The currency plan from last year had not materialized, either.

---

He found Leo, Karl and Robert sitting on the porch of the state office building with the representatives of most of the other states. A trooper was passing out juice, coffee and tea. Karl shrugged and jerked his head toward the door, which was being guarded by two Tennessee troopers in dress uniforms.

---

He was about to say something when the doors were opened by another trooper and they were invited in. Their footsteps echoed through the hall as they crossed to the Governor’s Office on the far side of the central room. A long table occupied most of the space with extra chairs against the walls.

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“Please be seated, ladies and gentlemen,” the governor said in greeting.

“Refreshments will be served later, but there is coffee, juices, tea or water available.”

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The delegates seated themselves and after the noise of scraping chairs and beverages being poured had died down, the Chairman of the Tennessee Defense Committee, Baxter Ashe, pulled down a map from the ceiling behind the governor’s chair. He used a lightpen to explain the situation, the red beam darting across the roads and terrain.

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He turned around and pushed his glasses back up his nose. “There has been no change in the situation since Paul left for Gunnison.”

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Robert held up his hand and was recognized. “Forgive me, but you don’t seem too concerned that a large part of your militia is missing.”

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“Mr. Agnello, don’t confuse calm with unconcern. We are getting worried and our citizens are getting worried. There is a lot of talk about the danger of attack to outlying settlements. We have been trying to keep up the usual

patrols and have turned over most of the Missouri border watch to Kentucky.

---

“You probably are wondering why we didn’t go into emergency session the minute you got here. There is nothing that we could have done last night. I imagine that today the men are feeling a little under the weather and would have been in no shape to move out. Plus, you told Paul that you wanted things to appear normal. If we had gathered last night, any spies would have correctly interpreted that move as a war council and would have been alerted.

---

“As it is, we have put out that we want to handle it ourselves and that we look upon this as patrols that have been lost or are out of radio range.”

---

Robert nodded his apology.

---

“Now, to the matter of what we need to do. Paul has given us a thumbnail version of the plan. Can you give a little more detail?”

---

Karl nodded to Leo, “Go ahead and start off, Leo.”

---

Leo rubbed his head and took the light pen, “Okay, we want to insert three teams of rangers, here, here and here.” He pointed to the areas where the patrols were lost.

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“The first one will leave here sometime after dark. We have been moving and intermingling everybody’s men and I don’t see how they would be missed. Unless, of course, someone spotted them leaving. They would move parallel with the first ‘lost patrol’ and try to find some trace of them. From Corinth to Birmingham is a long way and there is a lot of territory. Hopefully, they will meet up with your rangers and join forces to find the lost troop.

---

“The other two groups will be with us when we head for Hopkinsville, Kentucky in a week. They will split off on successive nights. The second scouting party will go on the first night. They will follow your 3<sup>rd</sup> Troop. The last scouting party will break off when we are around Hopkinsville and strike out for Bowling Green.

---

“Each party will have a dozen or so of the message stones and will leave detailed reports on the micro-recorders that our people installed. What we need from your people, Baxter, is to collect these messages. But, you need to make it look like routine patrols or a search for the missing troops or something. We don’t want anyone to suspect that they are following a trail or it may alert them to the scouting party.

---

“Another thing. Just what do you want them to do if they find these lost troops? ”

---

“That would depend in what condition they find them. If they have been killed, track down the killers; if prisoners, come back for a rescue party; if lost, well, bring them back under my orders. I will send written instructions with each party.”

---

“About the patrols, I understand the need for deception, but it will be a lot harder the farther from Jackson we get.”

---

The representative from Mississippi, John Kent, knocked on the table and said in a raspy voice, “We’uns have sent patrols out toward Alabama a’fore. Wun’t be a problem to send a couple in a week or so, if you think they’d be down in that neck of the woods, around Belmont.”

---

“Okay, John, I’ll get you a couple of receivers and plan on them being through Belmont by the time your patrol gets there.”

---

Leo sat down and Karl took up the pointer pen. “Thanks, Leo. What the rest of us have to do is be ready for a support or rescue mission. We want to be close enough to be available on short notice, but not too close to spook whoever is out there. Governor Merle of Louisiana and Sanders of Mississippi are going to order some joint maneuvers around Starkville and Columbus. We will play it up big on the radio, lots of traffic.

---

“Governor Mitchell, you will be asked if you want to join in, but you will send your regrets and stress that you are in no position, what with the loss of three troops.”

---

“Will that not put us in the bull’s eye, Mr. Wetherby?” asked the governor.

---

“Yes, ma’am, it will. But, you will have a little assistance from Arkansas and Texas. Each will send two reinforced troops. I would like you to suggest good, defensible positions where they can settle in like new colonies. They would be the bait. It would look like you are expanding your territory and that’s another excuse for keeping your troops at home, to patrol out towards these new settlements.

---

“The last group will be the men in Kentucky that we will all bring up there with the delegates. With care, the enemy won’t realize that we have strong support for any incursion they may make.

---

“It is our hope that the Scouts will make contact and give us an idea of the picture out there in a few days to a week. The Tennessee patrols are not going to be a problem; they would be out there anyway. The joint maneuvers by Mississippi and Louisiana can be stretched to a month, if you send messages that the men are not progressing satisfactorily and you want more time in the field.

---

“The hardest sell will be the Kentucky negotiations. I don’t know how long we can realistically keep them going while keeping a half dozen troops sitting idly around.”

---

The issue was discussed and it was decided that they would have to play it by ear. Baxter took the floor and pointed out two locations for the ‘new settlements’. One was at the crossroads town of Lawrenceburg. There was the David Crockett State Park where they could set up the initial camp. The forest land was on a ridge and had plenty of water and game. He noted that the town itself had been burned years before.

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A second site was on the east side of Pickwick Lake at the Bruton Park Recreation Area. There were several small marinas in the area and small fishing boats, open swim boats and houseboats should be abundant. A patrol in the area had reported it nearly untouched by scavengers or reavers as of a few months ago.

---

After the meeting, Zach and the Jefferson representatives joined their families at the hotel for lunch and to plan the rest of the day. It was after dark before Zach and his family turned in after a satisfying day visiting and sightseeing. The only complaint Zach had was the pack of ‘young idiots’ pestering Lizzie, who had decided on a light summer dress rather than denims.

---

“Oh, Zach, really,” Sarah said later in bed when he mentioned it. “You are going to have to realize that she has grown up. We raised her right and that is all we can do. Heaven help our daughters when they come of age.

---

“And,” she continued when he was about to speak, “stop enlisting the boys as watch-dogs. She has your kind of stubborn streak and all you are going to do is chase her into the arms of the first boy she sees, just to spite you.”

---

Zach wrapped his arms around his wife and, wisely, said nothing. He knew Sarah was right, but he considered Lizzie as his eldest daughter and he



felt the same protective instinct he had felt for the child he lost during The Troubles.

---

The next morning he took his sons aside and let them know that Lizzie was not to be smothered. He sent William off to Karl who had planned a little light training with the RTs and the 1<sup>st</sup> Troop. The rest of the family went to the park where the musicians from the different contingents planned on having a ‘Battle of the Bands’.

---

While they were listening to the music, Leo joined them. He reported that Gregg’s scouts had gotten off without, as far as anyone could tell, being spotted.

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“I sent Daniel and Jimmy’s Rangers on a wide sweep to the east and they found nothing interesting.”

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Gregg led his small group south. They stayed to low ground as much as possible, scanning any open spaces for indications that there were strangers about. The few farms they encountered were given a wide berth, although there were a few alert watchdogs in the distance which bayed at their scent. The night was cool and they made good time towards Corinth.

---

They arrived just as the moon set and took refuge in a burned-out barn. One corner, under the hayloft still had a roof. The hay, though musty, provided them with a place to lay their blankets and get some sleep.

---

Though the lookout in the loft had a good view of the countryside, there was no indication of life, outside of a few deer and small animals. Gregg called them all together to eat and plan the next leg. They were eating cold rations to avoid a fire.

---

“We are going to travel down US45 to I-22. Flank the roads and avoid the open, if you can,” he said. “Spanish Mike, you take Henry and Alex and take the east side. I’ll take Johnston and Jimmy with me. Try to avoid any open places, but head back to the Interstate every once in a while to look for tracks. With wagons, I don’t imagine they will be cutting across country, but they may have taken to side roads...”

---

“Or been taken,” interrupted Mike.

---

“Or been taken. They may have abandoned the wagons, so keep an

eye out for them hidden someplace. Every night we camp opposite each other, but don't cross over the Highway unless it's really important, we don't want to leave tracks.

---

"Mike, here's your copy of the map. I've marked the approximate camping places. Look for a wide-open area and keep at the edge of the woods. Every hour, blink your light three times until there's a reply. If you find something, blink five times after you get your initial reply.

---

"Okay, eat up and let's get out of here."

---

They policed the area, making sure that nothing was left to show a group of men had been there. The two teams headed out.

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The goal the first day was to make a crossroads just north of Baldwyn. As the two groups made their way down US45, they found no new tracks, either on the highway or any of the side roads they carefully crossed, though they did find evidence of where the expedition camped.

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At the noon break, Johnston Smith said thoughtfully, "Notice peculiar?"

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Most people could not understand the man's odd way of using the minimal number of words he possibly could. During his boyhood, he and his family had been assigned to a farmer by the Jerusalemites. He stuttered and was beaten every time he spoke. It was unfortunate that the farmer also stuttered and thought he was being mocked. Johnston had learned which words to use and not very many of those.

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"No one else around. There are no people anywhere. You think they were taken?" asked Gregg.

---

"No bones or burning."

---

Jim Chin nodded towards the road. "Do you want me to toss a message stone over there for Spanish to find?"

---

Gregg thought a moment and shook his head, "No, let's see what we find during the rest of the day."

---

As they continued on, they passed more deserted dwellings. They looked like they had been abandoned without any haste. Most of the doors were locked and the furniture covered as if they were summer homes at the close of the season.

---

It was after dark when they reached the appointed location. They saw the signal from Spanish Mike's trio and returned it. Johnston detected a signal from a message stone and the note had a single question: "See any people? Once for YES and twice for NO."

---

Gregg took his light and switched it on and swung it in a short arc. He was answered with a double flash. A double flash was returned from the other side of the road.

---

"They haven't seen anyone either," he said. "Wouldn't be reavers. Even if the people had gotten away, there would have been damage and burning. I never yet heard tell of a band of reavers who had respect for others' property."

---

Early the next day, they waved to Mike's party and set out again. Just before midday, Jimmy, who was on the eastern end of the line, held up his hand in the 'caution' signal. Johnston and Gregg immediately dropped to a crouch and edged towards their left to be able to support their comrade.

---

They watched Jim make a wide circle and approach something in a low spot in the ground. He scrambled up the bank towards them and bent over, gagging.

---

The other two sprang forward and looked into the hollow. The body had been partially eaten, but they could see that it was of a youth with a badly broken leg. A pack and rifle were near the body. From the bank, they could not see any major wounds.

---

Gregg tied his neckerchief over nose and mouth and edged down to the body. A cloud of insects rose at his approach. He threw the rifle, pack and a knife from its belt to Johnston and Jim. Without touching the body, he examined it. One hand was lying on a patch of mud at the bottom of the bowl. The leg looked as if it had been self-splinted. The branches on either side had been tied with cloth torn off a shirt. He could not tell if the leg had turned gangrenous, but the animals had not touched any of the damaged limb.

---

Feeling sick, he climbed out and joined his two companions. They had opened the pack and found some clothes, matches and miscellaneous jumble of other items, but no food or water. The rifle showed some weather damage, but little rust.

---

"Looks like he got hurt, patched himself up and managed to get here

before things ended,” observed Jim.

---

“Yeah, there was no sign of any other wounds except for the leg. My guess is that he crawled down to get the water at the bottom and couldn’t get out. He was game, though. You could see where he tried to climb out and slid back. That’s probably why the body is as intact as it is, no large animals would get into that trap.”

---

They buried the body by levering the banks onto it with their knives and sturdy branches. Afterward, they threw as many large stones as they could find to try and cover the remains.

---

Several miles away, they came upon the man’s mount. It, too, had a broken leg and had its throat cut. They found where a small sapling had been cut and trimmed for the splints. A canteen with its seams split was found nearby. It was clear that the horse had stepped in a gopher hole and broken its leg. The rider had been thrown and broken his own leg.

---

The saddle bags had been burned with a ‘2R’ over crossed axes. On the other side a faint ‘J. Graves’ had been scratched. Gregg showed them to Johnston who nodded and said, “2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee Rangers.”

---

That evening Gregg and his rangers arrived first at the rendezvous. The meeting place was under the I-22 bridge near the water, opposite the town of Fulton. They scouted the area thoroughly but the only signs of life were old campfires and an old grave. They set up camp under an abutment and waited, chewing on dried meat and drinking treated water from the stream.

---

Just before dark, they caught a signal from the bank. Spanish Mike and his men were weary, but upbeat. The two groups greeted each other like the friends they were. Johnston took first watch while the rest huddled together to keep the sound of their voices down.

---

Jim explained about finding the Tennessee ranger and showed the saddlebags and weapons. Gregg took over and noted the lack of human life and the buildings abandoned with no sign of haste or panic.

---

“It looks like someone is herding everybody together,” observed Henry. “Does this feel like what happened in Louisiana? I wasn’t around then.”

---

“No, it really doesn’t,” answered Gregg. “The buildings aren’t sealed and repainted. They may be rounding people up and moving them to a central location to start from there, but I have the feeling that it’s something

different.”

---

“Well, what about the ranger you found?” asked Alex. “What do you think he was doing out here?”

---

Mike spit out the grass on which he was chewing and said, “I think the ranger was heading back to Tennessee. Maybe to report, maybe he was the only one alive or who got away. You say he was off the road, so there must have been something worrying him.

---

“Gregg, this is your show. What do we do now? Go on or go back?”

---

“Did you guys see anything?” he countered to Mike.

---

“Nothing more than you did. Empty buildings and no burning. Weird.”

---

“All right. The road showed signs of the wagons and horses heading east. The tracks are old and wind has blown most of them away, but it looked to Johnston like there were more than the three the Tennessee boys had. Maybe they are collecting the civilians and taking them along?”

---

Alex spoke up, “We’ve come across several campsites and I noticed that the first few had, what looked like, communal fires. All of them were close together. There was a common latrine. The last one had a lot of separation between the big cooking fires. Four or five wagons were parked together in one spot and another group was parked a little ways away.

---

“Whatever is going on, I figure that there is trouble in camp.”

---

Gregg tugged on his ear, “We saw the same thing. They are not traveling with any speed, that’s for sure. I think the Tenns are gathering up the civilians as they go.”

---

“If they did that, then there is something serious going on or the commander of the Tenns is an idiot,” Mike observed.

---

The next morning before dawn, the six rangers moved cautiously across the freeway bridge. Johnston and Jim climbed the bell towers of churches on opposite ends of town. The rest began a comprehensive search. They finished around 4:00 in the afternoon and gathered in a diner on the south end of town, near the cemetery.

---

During the sweep of the town, they had picked up some canned goods and raided an overgrown kitchen garden. The solar panels still provided enough power for the stove and Alex took over the duties of chef. The rest lined up

along the counter.

---

“Nothing,” Johnston said.

---

“Succinct and accurate,” quipped Jim. “You know, Gregg, if we do this with every town we run into, we will be here until we are old and gray. Now, you, that wouldn’t hurt being married and all, this is like a vacation from your wives and kids, but I am wooing a certain young lady who is probably pining for me, as we speak.”

---

“Yeah, I can see her now, finding comfort in the arms of some young swain. Strong of arm and weak of mind. With a chiseled, dimpled chin and curly blond hair,” joked Spanish Mike. He ducked a playful punch.

---

“That for you, evil villain,” hammed Jim. He posed with his hand to his brow. “My true love would never turn her limpid eyes to someone with blond hair.”

---

“All right, all right,” Gregg interrupted. “Enough of the horrible melodrama. No wonder we never saw you two clowns in any of the productions.

---

“I agree with you, Jim. We can’t search every town like this. Tomorrow we push on. Same as before, we flank the roads, but head straight south until we hit Birmingham the turn-around point for the expedition. From there we take it a little slower until we run out of time, if we don’t find sign of them before that.”

---

Alex called out from the stove, “When do we have to start back?”

---

“Dad said he would have the cavalry out in a week if we hadn’t reported in or returned. You know what that means, dad will come riding down the road with Zach and Karl and as many troops as they can muster.

---

“I don’t know about you, but I am not about to be ‘rescued’ by three old folks and have to listen to lectures all the way back home. I figure that we have another three days to spend on the outward leg and, barring the discovery of a radio, we head back. The only thing is, I thought we would be seeing some mounts we could appropriate. The way it is, we are going to have to hoof it pretty good on the way back.”

---

Henry went to his backpack and pulled out some maps. They were spread out on the counter and five heads bent over them. Mike traced a finger from Fulton to Hamilton and on to Winfield. “That’s about thirty miles. I say we head for Winfield tomorrow night, Cordova, or a little beyond, the next and

Birmingham the afternoon of the third day.

---

“We can do a little searching in Birmingham and decide whether to head back to daddy.”

---

Gregg ignored the dig and said, “That’s about all we can do. And look for mounts; I don’t really want to run all the way back to Tennessee.

---

“Hey, Alex, that stuff burned enough to eat, yet?”

---

After dinner, they set a guard schedule and bedded down for the night.

---

A rooster’s call led them to an abandoned chicken coop and a dozen eggs. Alex wondered how the fowl had escaped the varmints in the area and debated grabbing a couple of chickens for dinner. Gregg vetoed the idea, saying that they were going into cold camps from here on out.

---

After breakfast, the two groups separated and set out. They kept to a trot for the first hour, and then alternated walking and trotting. Other than a few deer, they did not spot a single living creature. An occasional detour to the road showed the same wind-blown tracks. They passed several more camp sites as they sped along the highway. Johnston shook his head and pointed that the spacing between the sets of wagons had increased.

---

They made their noon stop at the site of a camp. Henry pointed out that there were fewer wagons in the group they calculated were the civilians. Gregg sent him back to the last crossroads to find if they had missed some of the wagons turning off. He returned a half-hour later and indicated that at least three wagons had turned off and headed west.

---

The tracks were noticeably fresher as they pushed south. That night they crossed the road and camped with Spanish. They discussed their findings, but did not come to any conclusion other than there had been some disagreement and several of the party had gone their own way. There was general consensus that the Tennesseans had not been captured or killed and that they were collecting civilians as they progressed.

---

By noon of the next day, they knew that the expedition was only a little way ahead of them. They spent the night at Winfield and got an early start. Alex wanted to go all out and catch up with them as soon as possible, but the Gregg overruled him. They did not want to go rushing into an unknown situation at full speed.

---

That evening they reached Cordova just before sundown. Several of the expedition's camps had been only miles apart. The number of wagons had grown again indicating that more families had joined or been forced to join the Tennesseans.

---

Jim, who was on watch, called the others over and pointed towards Birmingham. There was a faint glow in the near distance. To the experienced rangers, it was evident that several large fires were burning.

---

Spanish Mike spat in disgust at the sight. "Stupid," he said. "Unknown territory and they are lit up like a Christmas Tree. We ought to go down there and scare Hell out of them."

---

There were murmurs of agreement, but Gregg cut them off with, "Right. Let's go sneaking down there and jump out and say 'Boo'. I will bet that no more than half of us would get shot. Look, the tension down there is probably pretty high and everyone will be jumpy and ready to shoot at the drop of a hat.

---

"Tomorrow, we scout the situation and go in slow and easy. If we have to, we fly a white flag. Okay? Anyway, it may not be them or there may be something choppy about the whole thing."

---

The next morning, they set out together. They swung wide around the highway, but were soon edged back west by the river. There was heavy growth over an old burn and they were forced to hug Pea Ridge Road. When they smelled smoke, Gregg called a halt. He assigned Jim, Johnston and Spanish Mike to hold their position. "You guys be ready to give us cover fire if we come out hot," he ordered.

---

He led Alex and Henry through the brush and young trees. A few minutes of careful progress brought them to the edge of a small clearing. They detoured around a crumbling building and crossed Pea Ridge. Using another half-burned warehouse and a residence as cover, they followed a side road almost swallowed up by the forest.

---

Gregg halted again at the remains of a trailer and studied the road above them. They looked down the road and saw another clearing where the expedition was parked. There was a house and outbuildings and very little sign of any activity. Shedding his weapons, Gregg found a branch and tied his spare undershirt to one end.

---



Cautioning the others to cover him, he walked out holding his makeshift flag and his right hand high. He was disconcerted by the lack of attention that was being paid him. Gregg was able to walk up to the larger of the two groups before anyone noticed him.

---

One of the children sitting at a folding table playing with a doll looked at him and smiled. Gregg smiled back and said, "Hi."

---

"Who are you?" an old man sitting in a dilapidated rocker demanded.

---

At the sound of the quavering voice several people grabbed for weapons and children were gathered up. Gregg stood there ignoring the questions shouted at him until a group of troopers pushed through the crowd.

---

The leader, not over eighteen with long, blond hair and a downy beard, demanded, "Who are you, where do you come from?"

---

Gregg answered as he dismantled his makeshift flag, tossing the stick onto a nearby pile of firewood, "My name is Gregg Appleton. I am on detached duty from the Jefferson Rangers to the State of Tennessee." He hesitated and decided not to continue as he did not know the situation.

---

There were murmurs from the crowd. The leader spun and shouted, "Break it up, here. I'll get to the bottom of this." He turned back to Gregg, said his name was Lieutenant Scott and ordered him to follow.

---

The ranger nearly refused the order, but he did not want to get into a public argument. He found himself flanked by armed troopers when he started off after the officer. Glancing at his guards, he mentally shrugged and was glad he had not brought Alex and Henry in with him. He knew that they had seen the whole thing and would wait until nightfall before informing the others and making any move to rescue him.

---

He was led to a large tent and seated across the table from another officer who held a short, whispered conference with Scott. When Gregg looked around he saw the two guards had been stationed at the entrance to the tent.

---

"Am I a prisoner?" he asked with a slight smile on his face.

---

"Not if you are who you say you are, Mr. Appleton," replied the other. "I'm John Carpenter, leader of this troop.

---

"Now, what are your bone fides?"

---

Gregg unsnapped a pouch at his belt and held out the order from Baxter Ashe. While John read it, his guest sat quietly, studying him.

---

“How do I know this is not forged?” was the first question asked.

---

Gregg described Ashe and outlined the plan to find the lost patrols. John listened, gnawing on a thumbnail.

---

“They know we are not lost. I sent a ranger back weeks ago, just after the rangers found us. He must have gotten back to Jackson by now and told them our radio was ruined crossing a river.” John Carpenter’s voice sounded petulant.

---

“I found your scout north of Fulton. His horse looked like it had fallen and rolled over him, broke a leg on both of them. He tried to carry on, but got trapped in a hole, looking for water and couldn’t get out. I have his belongings. J. Graves from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rangers was on his saddlebags.”

---

Carpenter got up and began nervously pacing the confines of the tent. “Then they don’t know what happened.” He continued to pace and mutter. Gregg heard him say, “Damn Graves, he always lets me down.” The Jefferson Ranger realized that the man was on the edge of a breakdown. He wanted to get out of here and speak with some of the civilians and troopers to assess the situation.

---

As he stood up, John jerked around, “Where do you think you are going?”

---

“I’m a little hungry and tired. I thought I would get something to eat and a couple of hours sleep,” was the answer given in a soothing voice.

---

Carpenter flapped a hand at him in dismissal and went back to pacing and muttering. Gregg picked up his rifle and stepped out of the tent. He noticed that some of the civilians were in a loose crowd near their wagons and he walked casually in that direction. Immediately, Lt. Scott was at his side.

---

The ranger explained that he was on his way to get the equipment he had cached outside of their camp and find a place to sleep and eat. When the young Lieutenant tried to send a guard, Gregg refused and threatened to get Carpenter involved.

---

As he passed near the crowd of civilians, he gave a slight jerk of his head to a steady-looking, middle-aged man smoking a pipe. A slight nod was

returned.

---

When he got to the trailer, he found that the man had followed him. Gregg introduced himself and learned the other man was Lyle Cassidy from a farm near Carbon Hills. The farmer was taken aback when Henry and Alex showed themselves. They were hidden from the camp by the trailer and Henry observed, "You are being watched, Gregg."

---

Casually, the ranger turned and saw Lt. Scott standing at the edge of the camp. "Keep out of sight, you two; there is something fishy going on here. "Mr. Cassidy, try and ignore my men. We are from Jackson, Tennessee. The government sent us to find what happened to their men."

---

Lyle cleaned, stuffed and lit his pipe before answering. "Like I said, I only got yanked into this little fiasco since Carbon Hill. From what I understand, this Carpenter has been scooping up everybody and everything that could breathe since they crossed into Mississippi. I was told that there was a big gang of reavers in the area and we had to gather what we could and go along."

---

"It didn't make sense, somehow. Swede Jensen, who has been here the longest, told me that they would wait a day, even two, in a spot searching for people. And there was no attempt to circle around and get back to Tennessee or head west towards Vicksburg and the settlements there."

---

"He said a couple of families broke off and tried for Vicksburg, but Carpenter sent a patrol out and they came back with the news that the wagons had been caught and attacked by the reavers. Since then, no one wanted to leave, but there has been a lot of grumbling and everyone is pretty unhappy, even his own men."

---

"A bunch of rangers found us, but he refused to go back. Wouldn't let them leave either. He did send one man back, one of his lackeys, but nothing has been heard of him."

---

Gregg thought for a moment. "Henry, take Spanish Mike and Jim and head back as fast as you can," he finally said, looking at Lyle. "Let them know the situation and tell them to send someone with enough authority to turn this thing around."

---

"Alex, you and Johnston find a place to camp and where you can keep an eye on us. If they move out, leave messages."

---

He shook his head as if refusing something Lyle proposed. “Lyle, look disappointed. If anyone asks, tell them you wanted me to use whatever influence I had to let you leave. Now, look like you are pleading, grab my arm or something.”

---

Lyle played along by grabbing Gregg’s shoulder and saying, “But you have to let us go. I want to go home.”

---

Henry and Alex tried to smother snorts of laughter and Gregg had to twist out of Lyle’s grip in order to keep his back on the camp and hide his smile. It also served the purpose of shielding the farmer’s grin from any watchers.

---

“Lyle, you are one of the worst actors I have ever seen. Worse than my guys. Everyone, get a grip, this is serious,” said Gregg, wiping the smile off his face.

---

He walked to the corner of the trailer, grabbed his gear and headed back to camp. As he was setting up his tent near a patch of woods separated from both the civilians and the Tennesseans, a trooper approached.

---

“Sir, I was ordered to show you a better spot to pitch your tent and to take you to the mess tent.”

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“My tent is just fine here, thanks,” answered Gregg. “But I would appreciate a meal.”

---

Later that afternoon, he spotted one of the rangers who had followed the expedition. He was heading towards the river with a fishing pole over his shoulder.

---

Gregg casually followed him and sat on the bank by his side. “3<sup>rd</sup> Rangers, huh,” he said, indicating the pouch hung from a web belt.

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“Yeah,” was the terse reply as he pulled a beetle out of a small plastic bait box.

---

“Name’s Gregg Appleton,” the Jeffersonian continued.

---

“Mine’s Cory, Cory Gonsalves. Pleased to meet you.”

---

Gregg glanced slowly around, but did not spot any watchers. “I came from Jackson, looking for you guys. Tennessee was getting a little worried.”

---

Cory hesitated. “Tennessee isn’t the only ones,” he replied, cryptically.

---

With a little prodding, Gregg got his side of the story. When the 3<sup>rd</sup> Rangers found the trail of the wagons which broke off from the main group and saw the faint trace of smoke against the sky, they decided to follow. Shortly down the road, they discovered the tracks of a group of five horsemen who joined the trail, riding west. Ten miles later they came upon a smoldering barn. The tracks had continued on, with only the riders returning and heading southeast. “Four of them. They left a grave.”

---

There was a debate on whether to follow the wagons or the horsemen. “We figured that the wagons weren’t ours, ‘cause there weren’t any riders with ‘em.

---

“When we caught up with the expedition, Captain Carpenter and Lieutenant Scott were having an argument about something that had happened earlier. From what we overheard before they noticed us, Hoag, Hoag O’Brian our leader, decided not to say anything about the barn or following the wagons.

---

“After reporting in, Hoag wanted to leave, but Carpenter said there was too much danger of reavers. He said they were all over the place and we had been lucky to miss them. Scott even told us that he had had a run in with them after they had raided some wagons, looted and burned them after killing everybody that very day. He even said that one of his men had been killed before he and the rest had got away. We knew that was a lie. There weren’t any burned wagons or reavers about. We don’t know how his man got himself killed, but it wasn’t reavers.

---

“Anyway, we were told we had to stay and if we tried to leave, we would be reported as deserters when we got back to Jackson. Hoag didn’t believe him, but he had been in trouble with leaving without permission before and didn’t wanna take another chance, so we stayed.

---

“The story they told around was that reavers had wiped out the wagons and killed one of the troopers in a running fight, so nobody else would try to break off.”

---

He continued telling about how Hoag had snuck up on the command tent one night when Carpenter and Scott were having a meeting and overheard them talking about how they were going to sweep up all of the civilians they could and take them back to Tennessee to help with the population problem.

When he was slipping away, he tripped and made enough noise to alert the two in the tent. Carpenter had roused the camp and insisted that someone had tried to assassinate him. From that point on, a guard was positioned around the tent and there was no chance to get close.

---

Later that afternoon, as Gregg was sitting in front of his tent repairing some gear, Captain Carpenter approached with four guards. He lifted his hat and wiped his brow, looking around. After some forced small talk, he got to the point.

---

“You have instructions to ‘bring us back’, don’t you?”

---

“It says something like that in the orders I gave you. I don’t remember the exact wording,” replied the ranger. He noticed one of the guards had edged between the sitting man and his rifle. Gregg was conscious of the small caliber, lightweight automatic in the small of his back. He decided that Carpenter would be the first to go, if they made a threatening move.

---

“What are your plans, in that regard? I merely want to know because I would like to explore the Birmingham area.”

---

Gregg bit off the heavy thread he was using to fix a tear in his high moccasin. “I don’t think that would be a problem. There are still two women who are having trouble with their pregnancy, as I understand, so I don’t see why you can’t take half the troops and do a little reconnaissance.”

---

Carpenter rubbed his mouth, “I do not believe we should split our forces with the danger of the reavers. We should all go. Stay together for defense, mutual protection. Sweep the countryside and bring other civilians under our protection. Yes,” he continued, “it would be our duty to help save those in danger.”

---

Gregg knew that demurring would be ignored and might lead to a serious confrontation. What were needed were delays to allow a rescue party to arrive. “I see your point,” he observed. “We can delay starting back by a week or so. Let’s check with the midwife and see when the women will be able to move.”

---

They approached Mrs. Carmoody, a wizened, white-haired old woman. She was a no nonsense person who obviously had no respect for the commander. When asked about moving the camp, she became testy and insisted that her patients must have complete rest until they came to term.

---

Carpenter tried to reason with her, but she was insistent. Finally, the captain told her that they were moving out in one week. He stalked off, his back rigid with anger, followed by his guards.

---

Mrs. Carmoody cackled and went into the house where her patients were billeted.

---

Gregg went back to his tent and lit a fire. After eating pan-fried fish and bacon, he wandered around the camp, stopping briefly to speak at certain fires. When he returned, he had a clear picture of where the civilians, the rangers and some of the troops stood. None of them trusted Carpenter.

---

Most of the civilians didn't believe the captain's reaver story was more than scare tactic. Rumors had begun to spread that there were no reavers and the whole burning wagons story had been staged, even that Carpenter's men had done the killing and burned the wagons themselves. The rangers and troopers were not happy about continuing with any exploration. Morale was low and it would take little to create an incident.

---

Gregg had cautioned calm and patience. He said he had a plan, but would not elaborate. The civilians were reluctant to accept his vague promises until Mrs. Carmoody patted him on the arm and stated that they would wait a little while longer. The military side of the equation was relieved to have an excuse to delay what would be a mutiny.

---

That night, Gregg slipped out of camp and found Alex and Johnston. He explained the situation and told them to leave a message for the hoped for rescue party. They were to follow and keep out of sight.

---

The week passed slowly. One of the women gave birth to a stillborn son. Mrs. Carmoody used this as evidence that moving the other woman would be dangerous. Captain Carpenter set his lips and insisted on a start in six days.

---

The day of the move dawned cloudy and overcast. Gregg tried to get a delay because of the coming storm, but Carpenter would not budge and insisted that they would move out at midday.

---

Late in the morning, Gregg saw a flash of light from the elevated highway. He slipped into the woods, fading free of the constant watch Carpenter was keeping on him. An excited Alex met him and said that a big force was riding down the road. "It looks like our boys and there are a

boatload of them,” he said.

---

Gregg hurried back to camp. Finding Jethro Hoag, he sent him up the road to meet and talk with the advancing riders. Gregg stayed near the road where the riders would approach the camp. When the light again flashed from the highway, he found Carpenter and informed him that some troops were approaching along the highway and they carried a Tennessee flag.

---

An angry Carpenter hurried to the road in time to greet the vanguard of the column. Gregg heart leapt when he recognizes his father, Zach and Karl. Immediately behind them were Jim, Spanish Mike and Henry. Baxter Ashe rode forward and dismounted. He greeted Captain Carpenter and Lieutenant Scott in a perfunctory manner and asked them lead him to the command tent where they could talk.

---

“Major Garcia, please deploy the men. Set pickets, then join us. I will take 6<sup>th</sup> Tennessee with me and, I imagine, 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson will stay with the Jefferson representatives,” he ordered before following the two officers. Zach and Karl fell in behind the Tennessee troops. Leo slid off his horse and greeted his son.

---

Once at the tent, a cordon of troopers was organized to keep the civilians at a distance while Baxter met with Carpenter and Scott. Karl ordered Matt Busby and the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson to assist, if necessary.

---

Once inside, Baxter took the seat behind the desk. Chairs were brought in for Karl and Zach. Captain Carpenter and Lieutenant Scott shot each other apprehensive glances and stood at attention before their commander.

---

“You two gentlemen are relieved of your command and assigned to my staff,” Ashe began. “There are serious questions about your actions and judgment. Major Garcia will take command of your units until a new officer is appointed.”

---

“Sir, I protest,” began Carpenter.

---

“Noted,” his commander interrupted.

---

“Sergeant!” he called. “Bring in the prisoners, please.”

---

Three troopers were ushered in. The tent was becoming crowded, so Zach and Karl moved their chairs outside and stood in the opening.

---



“You men accompanied Lieutenant Scott and another man in pursuit of some wagons which left the expedition. Is that correct?”

---

There were sullen nods and Lieutenant Scott stepped forward to speak.

---

Baxter held up a hand to forestall him and said, “Lieutenant Scott, I assume that you will knit us a cock and bull story about reavers. I can bring in witnesses who will testify that there were no reavers and that you burned down a building and concocted a tale of how reavers attacked the wagons, wiped out the occupants and killed one of your troopers, a Lem Cordet, in a running fight.”

---

Scott grabbed for his pistol, but the guards wrestled it away from him and knocked him to the floor. They dragged him to his feet and shoved him to join the troopers.

---

“Wait, you can’t blame us for this,” shouted one of the prisoners.

---

“Shut up, you idiot,” snapped Scott.

---

“I ain’t hanging for you! Scott shot Lem. He wanted us to follow his lead about the reavers and Lem refused. They got into an argument and the Lieutenant shot him. We didn’t have anything to do with it. Nothing,” the trooper pleaded.

---

“But you reported it?” stated Baxter.

---

“Well, no. He, he threatened us. Yeah, he threatened us and he was Carp’s favorite. So we was scared. And that’s why we didn’t report it.”

---

Ashe leaned back in the chair. “So, Captain Carpenter was in on it, this murder?” he asked.

---

“Okay,” another trooper interjected. “Scott reported to Carp what had happened. He told him that he shot Lem, so we didn’t have to report it. Scott did. And Scott shot Lem, remember that.”

---

“This farce has gone on long enough. The rangers who followed you found spent shells scattered around where Cordet was killed. They put the number of shooters at four, from the pattern of casings and hoof prints. That means that all of you shot, not just Scott.

---

“Take them away, Major, and hold them under guard for transport back to Jackson. Including Captain Carpenter, as an accessory after the fact.”

---

After the men were led away, Ashe instructed the leaders of the civilians to be brought. Once inside, Swede Jensen and Lyle Cassidy shifted nervously in front of the desk. Ashe had chairs brought in and the interview began.

---

As it turned out, the civilians did not want to scatter back to where Carpenter and his column had picked them up, but to form another state. They realized that, though they had been lied to about the reavers, they were a real danger.

---

“After we heard about the things you are doing,” went on Swede. “We decided that it was a good idea. That young ranger gave us a copy of the new Constitution and we like it.”

---

“Mr. Jensen,” Ashe answered, “we in Tennessee would welcome you. As you may know, we are in need of settlers. The same can be said of any of the states, really. However, if you want to create your own state, that is up to you. Just where do you plan to settle?”

---

“Well, most of us are from eastern Mississippi or western Alabama.” He pulled out a map of the United States from a tattered Atlas and spread it on the table. “Now, you stretch from Kentucky across to Arkansas to keep the Mahdists and whoever is in Missouri in check. Down the Mississippi to Louisiana and over to Texas to keep the Mexicans or Aztecs bottled up and to make sure that no one lands to build a settlement from overseas.

---

“What you need is to spread out in the southeast from eastern Mississippi to the Atlantic. Gregg said there was a group of Muslims, peaceful ones, in Florida. Well, with a center here in Alabama, we can send parties out and build new states or settlements.

---

“You know, first in Alabama to the coast of the Gulf, then east through Georgia, the west coast of Florida and north through the Carolinas and beyond. Carpenter swept up a lot of people, but there are plenty more out there.”

---

Zach looked over the map and asked, “So where do you want to center your operation?”

---

Jensen put one gnarled forefinger on Gadsden and the other on Dothan. He explained that Gadsden would be used to explore into North Georgia and the Carolinas, while Dothan would form a base for South

Georgia and Florida.

---

Lyle piped in, “The Swede and I have talked it over with some of the others. We figure on setting up Gadsden as the capitol, for now. Around thirty families, a hundred and twenty-five to fifty would settle there. The rest would head south, picking up or registering people on the way.”

---

With good grace, Baxter discussed the plan and what assistance Gunnison could provide. Karl agreed to spend a couple of months with the Gadsden group to organize their troops and government. It was agreed that Gregg and his five rangers and a half troop of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mississippi would assist him.

---

Ashe asked Major Garcia to volunteer to perform the same duty with the families moving to Dothan. With him would go the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee Rangers and the other half troop of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mississippi.

---

The next morning a disturbing rumor quickly spread that the prisoners had escaped in the night. A hasty meeting was called and the officer of the watch, a gangly 19-year old, reported that the five prisoners had escaped and a rollcall had found another trooper missing. Mounts and equipment for six had been taken. Gregg reported that the tracks had pointed east, but had circled south several miles out.

---

Baxter ruefully said, “Good riddance to bad rubbish. I didn’t want to take them back all the way to Jackson just to banish or hang them, anyway.”

---

Leo looked at him quizzically. “You mean it is better to loose them on the population of this area than to suffer a little mental discomfort?”

---

Zach laid a hand on his friend’s arm to forestall words that would be hard to retract or forget. “I agree with Leo. By the time the ‘Bamans have a chance to build something, those six could have a sizable gang of reavers organized. Carpenter is a junior General March.

---

“I think we should send somebody after them and either bring them back or leave them where they lay.”

---

Baxter gulped coffee and swore when it burned his mouth. Tight-lipped, he agreed and Gregg led a party out an hour later. His orders were simple; bring them back if they surrendered.

---

Two hours later the trains for Gadsden and Dothan set out with as

many weapons and as much ammunition as could be spared. Gregg and his rangers would join the Gadsden group as soon as he was done with Carpenter and his men.

---

Several days passed before Gregg returned. He and his men brought back six horses and the weapons of the fugitives. Several, including Gregg, had light wounds, but nothing serious. Leo inspected his son's injury. A bullet had gouged a finger-width of skin and hair from above his left ear. Another inch to the right and it would have been fatal.

---

After dressing it, Leo said, "It's a good thing you are going to be in Gadsden for a couple of months. Give your hair time to grow to cover the scar. Your mother would have fits if she saw it now."

---

The next morning Gregg set out for Gadsden and the rest of the party headed north for Jackson. Zach, Baxter and Leo reviewed the next stage of their strategy on the way. They agreed that the situation was not as all encompassing as they had thought, now that they learned the situation of the Alabama expedition.

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## Chapter 4

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### Scouting Party – Jimmy and Jason

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*Spring/Summer 2052*

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*I guess the good news is that we found out what happened to the Alabama Expedition. It wasn't some grand conspiracy that stretched from Mississippi to Georgia to Virginia. Of course, it could be a smaller conspiracy stretching from Georgia to Virginia. I doubt that it has anything to do with Mahdists. Unless they have spread out through Ohio and Pennsylvania.*

---

*Leo is really proud of Gregg. He handled the whole thing well and didn't panic. He was smart enough to know when he needed help and he got it. Kept some backup, too. Not too good about the wound. That was close to being final. Never did hear the whole story, so it must have been some kind of a screw-up. These kids tend to spread around how they got wounded if it was 'heroic'. Well, like Leo says, he will be out of Cathy's sight until it heals.*

---

*Now, we have to plan the next move. We delayed the trip to Kentucky to let this drama play out. Alex wanted to see if Gregg could find the Alabama-bound troop and get any info that would help Daniel and Jimmy. Unfortunately, there was nothing to learn, so they will be going in blind. We have dispatched Robert Agnello and 23<sup>rd</sup> Jefferson to eastern Alabama to help them set up a government compatible with the U.S. If we can find a group willing to do the same in Georgia, we will be coast to coast again.*

---

*They still haven't heard from any of the other scouts or expeditions. Hopefully, it is just more radio trouble. However, we are going to head for Kentucky, whatever happens. It would be great to get them to join us as a new state and enable Tennessee to join forces with them to patrol the Ohio border. There are rumors of refugees crossing the river to escape the Mahdists and the scattered reaver gangs, but with a virulent form of the plague.*

---

*The only thing that has lightened up the tension is the Rag-Tag Troop. They have picked up a few more 'recruits' and its pretty comical to see them maneuver, though the last time I laughed, I got a jab in the ribs from both Sarah and Lizzie. I've got to fatten them up some; they have the sharpest damn elbows I have ever felt. The things are lethal!!!!*

---

---

The expedition to Kentucky was organized when Baxter, Zach and Leo returned to Jackson. Everyone was relieved about finding the Tennessee troops and excited that Alabama was being organized. The rest of the rangers were ready to deploy, though Jason was still moody and irritable at not having command. His dad took him aside, again, and talked to him. He still was not happy, but he was more cooperative.

---

Zach, Daniel and Jason tried to send their families back, but it was a losing proposition. Leo was openly amused when the husbands beat a hasty retreat from the confrontation. His 'I told you so' attitude did not help their wounded pride. Gregg's wives, Mary and Peggy, insisted on joining him under escort of Robert and the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

---

The morning the caravan set out was bright and clear. A gentle wind stirred the air and added a welcome coolness to the heat. There were thirteen mounted infantry troops and five ranger troops.

---

The 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson and the 10<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro Rangers led the way. The 4<sup>th</sup> Louisiana and 1<sup>st</sup> Arkansas Rangers provided flanking cover, while the 5<sup>th</sup> Texas Scouts brought up the rear.

---

The 6<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Troop provided drivers for the wagons. Zach, Leo and the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Troop were stationed at the head of the caravan with Ishtar Singh, the 9<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro Troop and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kansas Troop. On the flanks were the 1<sup>st</sup> Tennessee, 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Mississippi, 12<sup>th</sup> Texas Rangers, 20<sup>th</sup> Jefferson and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Louisiana Troops. Bringing up the rear were the 26<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro, 8<sup>th</sup> Kansas and 5<sup>th</sup> Arkansas Troops.

---

The second night out, Jimmy Gunderson, Jason Appleton and the other five rangers slipped out of camp and headed southeast towards Chattanooga. They found cover until the expedition had moved off the next day and darkness fell.

---

Feeling safe from detection, they followed side roads towards the Georgia border. The night was cool and they made good time. They passed deserted towns and farms, some had been burned and looted, some not. A pack of feral dogs picked up their trail around Lewisburg, but a few well placed shots encouraged them to look for less dangerous prey.

---

Jimmy set a demanding pace and the rangers started before dawn. On

the third day they reached the outskirts of Chattanooga. The city had been devastated by fire and there was nothing but stark, blackened walls standing. They made camp on Signal Mountain south of a ruined pharmacy.

---

The next morning, Tom Gordon climbed a large pine which had escaped the fire and surveyed the ruins. After a careful sweep with the field glasses, he reported that there were no signs of human life and several herds of animals were undisturbed, nor were there any flights of birds showing fright.

---

The US27 Bridge was down and they crossed the river over the Market Street/Tennessee 8 span. They drifted through the wreckage to I-24 and followed the interstate to I-75 where they headed south. They spent the night a few miles north of Dalton. Sylvester 'Sly' Fox commented, as they settled down to sleep, "You'd'a thought that we would find some sign of people. It's spooky." The rest let the comment die, though they were all thinking the same thing.

---

The next day, Corey was inspecting a farmhouse on the southern outskirts of Dalton and called the rest over. They gathered around a pile of human remains which were covered with flies and wriggling with maggots. Other than the insects and some scavenger birds they frightened away, there was no sign of predator activity. Arraigned on the side of the building were four graves. Some one had crudely carved: "3<sup>RD</sup> Tennessee" on the wall above them. Under that heading were carved four names: "John Bolls, Srgnt", "Brent Pentovski, Trpr", "Calvin Potts, Trpr", "John Pfister, Radio" followed by "Reavers Got Them."

---

"That may be why there aren't any other people around," observed Jimmy. "Reavers probably scared off or killed them. Any skags would have been taken by the rest of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee." Jason winced at the term used for the women slaves of reaver bands. Zach's wife Sarah had been rescued from that condition in Rawlins, Wyoming during the early days of the Mitchell settlement.

---

He noticed a series of marks carved in the bark of a large maple. They consisted of three Isosceles triangles aligned with the long point of each indicating south. As he approached to inspect them, he kicked an object at the foot of the tree, hidden in the tall grass. He stooped and picked up a battered

field radio. It had been hit by several shots.

---

“Here’s why they lost contact,” he shouted, holding up the useless device.

---

Jimmy and the rest gathered around Jason. They agreed that the carvings were a trail sign pointing in the direction the expedition had followed after their encounter with the reavers.

---

“From the way things look,” said Kipling ‘Poet’ Kimmel, “is that they ambushed the reavers, buried their dead and stacked the reaver bodies and left. The Tennessee Rangers that got sent after them found this place just like we did and left the marks for anybody following after.”

---

“The ‘Poet’ is right,” agreed Jimmy. “Well, there is nothing else here.” He pulled his Arkansas toothpick and added the trail mark of the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers below the triangles and they set out down I-75.

---

Later that day, south of Calhoun, they came across the Tennessee trail mark again. It was scratched in the asphalt and pointed along Georgia 53 towards Fairmont. They saw where camp had been made and the wagons had taken the small roadway. The trail was easier to follow because another dozen wagons had joined the party.

---

‘Sly’ followed Georgia 53 for a short ways and observed, “A dozen wagons were headed west on this road. They met with the Tennessee boys and they all camped together. Then they left together heading east on 53. The Rangers followed them.”

---

“So will we,” said Jason. At a sharp look from Jimmy, he continued defensively, “Isn’t that our job? To find the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee?”

---

Jimmy just nodded and started collecting sticks for a fire. “Let’s eat first.”

---

They picked up their pace and followed the trail signs to Dawsonville where the trail turned north on Georgia 9 to Georgia 136. From that point on, they wended their way north of Lake Sidney Lanier. As they moved east, the game had increased, but there was still no sign of a human presence.

---

Jason called a halt when they came to a campsite near Commerce. “Notice anything funny?” he asked.

---

“What?” asked Tom, panting with the pace.

---



“We are following three groups, now. The rangers, of course, but the troopers have split off from the wagons. There are no picket lines for the number of mounts they have. Just enough for the wagon horses. Fewer fires, too. The troopers are chasing someone.”

---

‘Sly’ had gone to a rise to keep watch. He turned and gave out a low whistle of warning. The rest of the scouts scattered for cover. Another whistle brought them slowly towards the rise. ‘Sly’ pointed to the east where a faint trail of smoke was rising. In the near distance, there were three men carrying a deer carcass on a pole.

---

Jimmy resorted to hand signals to order his men to spread out and follow. They moved to within fifty yards of the unsuspecting hunters and maintained that distance until they reached camp.

---

The wagons were parked in the lot of the East Jackson High School. A guidon of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee was painted on the side of three of the vehicles. The horses were grazing on the sports field, guarded by a couple of teenaged boys who were sitting in the bleachers talking.

---

Jimmy signaled Everett and ‘Sly’ to take them and the two scouts moved silently out. Within a few minutes the guards were bound and gagged. Everett stayed with the prisoners and ‘Sly’ rejoined the rest of the scouts.

---

The hunters had entered the gym with their burden. Several minutes later, several women came out and began to build fires on the lawn.

---

Jimmy led the rangers back to Everett. They questioned the boys and found out that the civilians were refugees from small bands of reavers which were raiding from the east. They had appeared about a month ago and had systematically looted and burned any settlements and farms they had come across. The only survivors of these raids were young women and young men. These had been herded east towards the coast.

---

There had been several attempts to stop them, but the defenders had been crushed and the rest had decided to flee. Every time they thought they had moved beyond the reach of the raiders, they had been forced to move again as the raids spread farther afield.

---

The refugees had finally decided to head for Alabama and had met the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee on the way. When they had appealed for help, the troopers had agreed to do what they could.

---

There were no rangers with this expedition, but the civilians were familiar with the countryside and led them east. They managed to trap and eliminate several small bands of reavers. The bodies were buried and the graves hidden.

---

When they crossed the Chattahoochee, they met other refugees that reported the raiders were falling back to Charleston. The leader of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee left the refugees and their own wagons to move to Jackson and pushed on. A group of Tennessee rangers had caught up with the civilians and then followed the troopers and those civilians who had ridden with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee. The rangers had followed them three days ago, but nothing had been heard of them since.

---

Halfway through the narrative Jimmy had ordered the boys' bonds cut. It was obvious that these were the refugees that had joined the Tennesseans. The decision now was whether to follow them or wait for news.

---

While they were discussing these options, a middle-aged man carrying a shotgun entered the field. He hesitated when he saw the group around the two boys, then advanced.

---

"Who are you?" he demanded.

---

Jimmy held up his hands, "We are from Jackson, TN. Part of a contingent of detached Jefferson rangers. We're looking for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee."

---

The older man cast a questioning look at the two guards and they nodded to support the story.

---

"They're not here," the man said. "We expected them back before this. Those other rangers went after them. They've not come back, either. You boys better come and meet with Joe Jackson. He's the head man around here, kind of the mayor, you might say."

---

The scouts filed out of the stadium with the shotgun wielding man following behind. He ordered them into the gymnasium, to the coaches' offices at the far end under the scoreboard.

---

A harried looking man in a brown windbreaker and wrinkled chinos met them at the door to the office. He held a hurried conversation with the rangers' escort. He waved them into the office and shut the door. His seamed face was covered with several days' stubble of iron gray beard. His nose was

the red of a reformed drinker and he wore an outdoorsman's tan.

---

"You in charge," he demanded of Jason.

---

He pointed to Jimmy in the way of an answer.

---

Jackson sat down behind his desk and waved absently at the chairs. "What in Hell is going on here?" he blurted out. "We keep getting dribs and drabs of kids in here all saying that they're looking for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee, which is purported to be lost!"

---

"When we met up with them, they weren't lost. We weren't lost. We been chasing these gangs down. They're not lost. If you know where you are, then you aren't lost. Good God, youngsters, I think those idiots in Tennessee are lost!"

---

"Okay, Mr. Jackson. Nobody's lost," Jimmy said, trying to mollify the excited man. "Where exactly are the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee Rangers and the young men from this outfit?"

---

Joe Jackson rubbed his hand over his head, disarranging his hair even more. He sputtered a few unintelligible words and settled back in his chair. After staring at Jimmy for a few seconds, he leaned forward and scratched his left cheek.

---

"They left three weeks ago, chasing the raiders, reavers they called them. We had picked off a couple of small bands, but the main group was pulling back. For their base on the coast, I'd guess.

---

"The Tennessee rangers came in a week after the rest had left and they went looking for them. So, I guess you could say they are not exactly pinpointed, but not really lost."

---

A hubbub started at the other end of the gym and spread to the office.

---

"Joe, Joe, come quick. There're back," an old man yelled through the hastily thrown open door.

---

Jackson led the rangers out of the office and forced his way to a group of ragged men. Several carried signs of wounds and people were working on them with first aid kits. There was a babble of questions from the crowd.

---

Joe set fingers to his lips and blasted out three ear-piercing whistles to quiet the noise. He ordered chairs, water and food to be brought and warned that he would take them somewhere quiet if any more questions were shouted

out.

---

Jason noticed that a half-dozen of the newcomers were in better shape than the others and wore a uniform of sorts. Long hunting shirts over pants tucked into high hiking boots. He muttered to Jimmy that these were probably the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee Rangers.

---

The mayor waited until food had been brought and addressed one of the rangers. He was a young black man with a deep scar under his left eye. This gave his face a permanent sneer. “Carlos, what happened?”

---

After a swallow of water, he answered, “Mr. Jackson, we came up on the tail-end of the fight. We managed to gather what survivors we could. We found a place to go to ground. A couple were wounded pretty bad. We waited until they could travel. One died, two didn’t. We buried the dead. Some followed the reavers back to their base. It was around Charleston. They came in on four paddle wheelers. They left the same way. Decks were crowded with horses, people and supplies.”

---

“Paddle wheelers?” said Joe incredulously.

---

“Yes, sir.”

---

The mayor turned to a blond boy who looked like the stereotype for the big, dumb, strong kid everyone made fun of in old movies. He continually rubbed his big hands on his thighs and listened intently, like English was a second language that he did not understand well.

---

“Buster,” Jackson said and the boy started and turned to look intently at the man. “What happened?”

---

“We chased them until they caught us, dad. We walked into a trap and they slaughtered us,” the boy replied. “They had been falling back and Captain Keith pushed on and ran right into it. The Tennessee boys were in front and they took the brunt of it, but we were in this ravine and they were all around. Most of us that got out were the rear guard. We hunkered down in some rocks on a hill and got a few, but it was a well thought out ambush.

---

“Oh, they shot all the wounded, but they took a few who surrendered for prisoners.”

---

Joe patted his son on the shoulder and signaled Carlos Kennedy and Jimmy to follow him back to the office. Jason managed to get a couple of the

2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee Rangers aside, but they could offer nothing more than their leader. The Jefferson Rangers and the surviving trooper from the fight and the three wagoners were waiting outside the office when the meeting inside broke up.

---

Jimmy waved off all questions and said, "Outside, away from the civilians."

---

They exited the building and gathered on a patch of grass marked with a weathered sign that said "Senior Lawn". Jimmy and Carlos sat facing a semi-circle of the other fifteen.

---

"You heard pretty much all there was to hear," Carlos said. "The boats looked like something out of Huck Finn. They are well armed and led. My boys and I are going to follow them."

---

"How many would you say are on those boats?" asked Corey.

---

"Maybe two hundred, three hundred, three hundred fifty. Double-decked, say 25 cabins each. Three, four to a cabin," Carlos answered.

---

Jimmy asked, "Any more questions?" When there were none, he continued, "We are going with Carlos and his men. Here's the plan: We will trail them up the coast and see where they land next. With that many people, and they probably have skags and captives for manual labor, they are going to need to stop for more supplies and fresh meat.

---

"Two of you guys are going to head back to Tennessee and Kentucky for help. Tell Zach or Alex or whoever is around, the situation. We will leave messages along the way. The two who draw the short straws will lead them back here where you pick up our trail.

---

"Oh, tell them to send someone to help these people get organized into a state," Jimmy finished.

---

Straws were drawn and 'Sly' and Pete Kowalski drew short. They were given supplies and mounts and rode away that day. The rest poured over maps and planned out their campaign. When they were done, Jason help up his hand like a boy wanting to be called on.

---

Jimmy took a mental deep breath, "Yeah, Jase?"

---

"What about the civilians? We just going to leave them here?"

---

"Crap," spat Jimmy. He looked at Carlos. "You got any ideas?"

---

“Find somewhere safe,” answered the Tennessean. “Some valley with farms.”

---

Maps were spread again. Most of the area around Atlanta was too open. John Fratelli, one of Carlos’ men, pointed to a long valley near the borders of Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. “What about this place? Near Toccoa, Georgia. It butts up against the Chattahoochee National Forest. The topo map shows water and there would be a place to hunt. There are a few small towns that we could check out pretty fast.”

---

“Oh, no,” countered Jimmy. “We don’t have time to baby-sit the civilians. Dropping them off there, checking out the country and getting them settled would take weeks.”

---

“Carlos, some of your guys are prisoners. Don’t you want to rescue them as much as I do?”

---

“Jimmy,” calmly returned the Tennessee ranger, “We have to think of the civilians. What if there are reavers in Toccoa? We can’t catch the boats unless they stop. We figure that they will do that near Camp Lejeune. They stayed here about a month. They will probably duplicate that there. Plenty of time.”

---

Grudgingly, Jimmy agreed. He and Carlos went to talk with Joe Jackson and Jason sent the others scavenging for supplies.

---

The next morning, the caravan set off, taking back roads. A cordon of rangers provided eyes against any surprises. They also continued scavenging, leaving signs where supplies were cached.

---

They gathered up other civilians, too. The caravan grew from a dozen wagons to over two dozen and there were families hauling their goods in wheelbarrows and carts. Jimmy chaffed at the pace to which they were reduced with people and livestock.

---

Jason and Bobby O’Brian, one of the Tennessee rangers worked with the younger members to form a cadre for future troops. They armed them from the Tennessee wagons, at first, but the weapons they had captured from the reavers quickly ran out. After that, they issued guns and ammunition as they became available through scavenging.

---

Unfortunately, the area had been picked over by others and there were not many weapons or supplies to find until they left the areas where

population had been more concentrated. While moving north, they encountered several small groups of reavers which they eliminated.

---

They reached the Toccoa Valley and the scouts began a systematic search of the dwellings and towns. There was no sign of habitation until they began investigating the Clarkesville area.

---

They found several families who had already taken up residence in adjacent farms east of town. Though hesitant at first, they welcomed the newcomers. Bill Travers, the leader of the settlers, admitted they were part of a reaver community near the coast that had been attacked. They had survived because they had been on a wood gathering expedition when the attack came. They buried the dead and began searching for another home. None of their reavers had been seen since.

---

They offered to show the newcomers abandoned farms that were in pretty good shape. Bill said there were cattle on the National Forest land that came down to graze, but they had run out of ammunition and they had not been able to round them up.

---

Suddenly, one of the men behind him stepped forward and spoke. "Tell them, Bill."

---

Bill rounded on the man. "You just hold your place, Spencer. It was nothing, so there is no need to get excited."

---

Jimmy put a hand on Bill's shoulder and gently turned him. "Now, Bill, you know that we aren't going to ignore what Spencer just said. If there is a problem, we have to know about it. Come on, spill it."

---

After a sharp glance at Spencer, the leader of the settlers said, "A couple of days ago, some guys came down the valley. They said they were looking for a place to settle. We invited them to join us. That's all." Bill wiped a sleeve across a suddenly perspiring forehead.

---

Carlos and Jimmy exchanged glances. The Tennessean issued silent instructions to his men to establish a screen in the direction Bill indicated. He then drew Jimmy out of earshot. "Something stinks. This guy is lying about something and if we don't find out what the story is, we could be in big trouble."

---

Jimmy nodded and he moved back to the group of settlers who were getting increasingly nervous. He walked up to Spencer and pulled him from

the crowd and took to where Carlos stood. Bill took a step forward and started to protest, but Jason put his gun's barrel against the man's stomach and smiled.

---

Before Jimmy had a chance to start his interrogation, Spencer started talking, "Look. Bill meant well, but he kind of hates to take charge. What am I saying? All of us are like that or we wouldn't have been slaves or serfs or whatever to the gang.

---

"Look. What happened is that Bill offered to do the same thing with this bunch. You know, we would do the work if they would protect us. Hey, we don't even have much in the way of firearms, so we need someone. Don't we," he finished lamely.

---

"Mr. Spencer..." began Jimmy.

---

"Cobb, Spencer Cobb," the man interrupted.

---

"Okay, Mr. Cobb, I am not here to judge you or anyone else. You can set yourself up any way you want. The problem I have is you are setting us up, too. When those reavers get back, they will be expecting a bunch of sheep waiting to be sheared. If the people I brought in don't want to be a part of this, do you think the reavers will just let them go? If you have changed your mind, do you think the reavers are just going to say "Okay, if that's the way you want it."?"

---

Spencer stammered and waved his hands.

---

"So, Mr. Cobb, what do we do? I doubt there is time for us to clear out," finished Jimmy.

---

Carlos, who had been silent during the exchange, finally said, "Yeah, and do you think they are just going to forget about us? No, they will chase us as soon as someone here says something." He held up a hand to forestall the assurances that no one would say anything. "Someone here will tell. They may do it maliciously, they may do it inadvertently, but someone will tell.

---

"And what if you want to go with us? They will track us down, believe me, they will."

---

Spencer hung his head in thought. "What can we do, then?"

---

"You know what we have to do. Don't act the fool," chided Carlos.

---

The dejected figure nodded and the three rejoined the crowd.

---



“Here’s what we are going to do,” announced Jimmy. “We are going to set up an ambush where the road breaks out of the thicket of new growth. Anyone who can fire a gun will be issued arms and ammunition...”

---

Bill said indignantly, “You can’t do that. It’s murder.”

---

Jason made a move towards him, but Jimmy stopped him. “Jase, take Carlos’s men and a dozen of anyone you think can take orders and head up the valley. You will form a cork to keep any from escaping. Carlos and I will take the rest and set up an ambush. The thickets will stop them from scattering and we should be able to mop them up. I’ll fire a flare, if we need your support.”

---

“You cannot do this,” shouted Bill. “Just take your people and go.”

---

Carlos went up to the man, put his arm around his shoulders and walked him a short distance away. “Mr. Travers,” he said. “If you say anymore, I will shoot you. Do you understand?”

---

“You can’t do that!”

---

“Mr. Travers, yes I can and I will. We stumbled into this mess and we, and you, are stuck with it. I don’t know under what rock you have been living these past ten, fifteen years, but the world has changed from the country club liberal era. This day and age are a dangerous time and reavers are the wolves at our door. We won’t be nice to them, try to reason with them or treat them as we would like to be treated. They have shown themselves to act outside of normal society and we, as normal society, won’t stand for it.

---

“So, be a good little man and you will live. You don’t have to fight. You don’t even have to help the wounded. However, when this is all over and I am still alive, Mr. Travers, you will bury all of the dead.”

---

As this conversation was going on, Jimmy observed to Joe Jackson, “That guy is lucky Zach Banducci isn’t here. He has no patience with his kind. Zach would have just shot him by now.”

---

Carlos assigned three of the older men to watch Bill Travers to make sure that he caused no trouble. Two others were stationed in the house where the women and children huddled. The rest of the men willing to fight the reavers were armed as well as possible and stationed in the woods and rocks lining the road down which the invaders would travel.

---

He sent Joe Jackson up the road to meet the reavers and lead them to the killing ground. Carlos told the man to dive for the ditch as soon as the shooting started.

---

Jimmy took station on one side of the road and Carlos on the other. They were continually cautioning the men to maintain silence. They had set the ambush at this point to lessen the danger if it was sprung early. The thickets of sweetgums and brambles on both sides of the road formed an impenetrable wall. The reavers would have to charge down the road or try and retreat back the way they had come.

---

They heard the sound of horses and the creak of wagons before they saw the head of the column emerge from the trees. There were six men in a bunch keeping a desultory watch. A dozen yards behind them was a small man on a white mare. Joe was walking beside him and gesticulating at the surrounding farmland. Behind them came the first wagon with a fat man driving. As he leaned over the side to spit, Jimmy shot him through the chest.

---

During the moment of stunned silence, Joe dove for the side of the road and made himself as small as he could. A burst of gunfire dropped five of the six lead men and the small man. The team broke into a run and several other men stormed out onto the road firing wildly and were cut down as was the final point rider. A hundred yards up the road, the left side of the wagon dropped into the ditch and the wheels shattered, dragging the horses to a halt. There was a cacophony of screams and distant shots followed by a fusillade that rose to a crescendo and faded.

---

Jimmy edged down the slope and motioned the others to stay where they were. He saw a tangled wagon jammed across the road, blocking it. Bending down to look under the vehicle, he saw several pairs of legs milling. Looking across at Carlos, he held up four fingers and pointed at his feet. A quartet crept down to the road and Jimmy indicated they stay hidden. Joe snagged a weapon and joined Jimmy.

---

The ranger called out, "Anybody want to live, slide under the wagon one at a time and come down the road with your hands up."

---

There was a murmur and a reedy voice yelled, "I thought you wanted a deal?"

---

"This place is under new management. No prior deals are being

honored. Come out now or we fire the woods.”

---

“Just let us go. We got no beef with you,” the voice replied.

---

Jimmy tested the breeze and saw that it wafted towards the wagon. He whispered to Joe to build a fire and throw some green leaves on it to create some smoke.

---

No one answered further queries from the trapped reavers. Another flurry of gunfire sounded from Jason’s men. By this time the smoke was starting to drift down the road. Another, louder, murmur of voices and then a cry, “Put out that fire, we’re coming out.”

---

“All right, one at a time when we call you. First one, come out now.”

---

A young woman in dirty jeans and a torn shirt came out first. She had a frightened look on her face and hesitated when she first saw Jimmy. He moved her to the side of the road and did a quick pat down to search for weapons. Ordering Joe to guard her, he waved to the men still hiding along the road to join him.

---

One after another they brought the reavers out and searched them. They were seated in a line along the road and ordered not to speak. A few knives and hide-out guns were discovered and piled out of the way.

---

It took over two hours before the last of the reavers were searched and seated in a triple row along the road. The bodies of the thirteen dead were laid on the other side of the road where the horses were tied and the weapons stacked. There were thirty men, twenty-six women and five children. Carlos and Jimmy searched the wagons for anyone hidden there, backed up by five men.

---

When they reached the last wagon, they signaled to Jason and his men to join them. There were seven bodies in the road. Jason explained that five were a rear guard and the other two had tried to escape when the firing started at the front of the caravan.

---

Corey Wilkins and two of the trainees were left to collect the weapons and anything else usable from the dead and guard the road. They were left the flare gun.

---

Back at the other end of the train, Joe had been interviewing the reavers and discovered that their situation had been similar to the Travers’

group. Most of them were the workers for the gang which protected them. They had been forced to move because of a stronger gang and were looking for a new area to settle.

---

“Looks like Benson in Missouri, all over again,” observed Jason.

---

Jimmy nodded. “The reavers are carving up provinces and enslaving people to do the work. Like Zach and Leo said, it’s a feudal system that is evolving from a wandering tribe system.”

---

Carlos interjected, “Whatever system it is, the question is what we do with them.”

---

Joe scratched his chin and said, “From what I got, we killed most of the reavers. There are only four more, those were the wagon drivers. The rest are just like Bill Travers and his mob.”

---

Jason looked at the older man. “You know, Joe, you are going to be in charge when we leave. It should be your choice on whether to let them stay or not. You’ve got forty or so of your own people, a dozen or so with Bill Travers and sixty with this group. That leaves you with a pretty sizable community. Mitchell was founded with around that number.

---

“You have a nucleus of a troop and there are four boys with Bill and eight or ten with this bunch. When we catch up with the reavers on the boats, and they are still alive, we will send the prisoners back, if they want.

---

“Personally, I think you can form the nucleus of a new state, Georgia or something. Send some people to look for others and bring them in or form alliances. Gunnison will send out people to help, like they always do.”

---

Joe nodded and stared at the prisoners, thinking. “What about the reavers?”

---

Jimmy answered, “My first thought is to execute them. However, you can interview the rest again and find out there opinion. The hardcases you kill and the others you integrate.”

---

While this conversation was going on, the lead wagon had been untangled from the thicket and the shattered wheels of the runaway had been replaced. They formed up, the prisoners were in advance, except for the eight pregnant women who rode in the back of a wagon. These were followed by the vehicles. The rear guard had appropriated the mounts and a rider had been

sent ahead to inform the rest of the party that they were coming in.

---

Three men and two women were separated from the rest of the prisoners, their hands bound. These had been condemned by the other prisoners as hardcore reavers who had perpetrated crimes and abuse on the others. Jimmy and Jason had suggested that they be hung immediately, but the rest had overruled them.

---

When the caravan entered the farmyard, Joe called for everyone's attention and turned the impromptu town meeting over to the Carlos. He stepped up to the porch of the farmhouse and addressed the crowd. "We managed to stop the reavers. Most of the newcomers were enslaved by them and have expressed a desire to join you. There is one reaver who has also asked to be included. These other five, however, were accused by the rest of criminal acts and are brought before you for judgment.

---

"Since this concerns all of you, everyone is empowered on the jury."

---

At this point Bill Travers and several other men from his band stepped forward. Bill asked, "What happens if we find them guilty?"

---

Carlos shook his head. "You will choose the punishment if they are found guilty. Raiders have, in the past, been executed when found guilty of these kinds of crime."

---

"What kinds?" asked one of Bill's companions. "We don't even know what they are charged of."

---

"Fair enough," answered Carlos. "The men have been accused of rape, murder and assault. The women have been accused of murder and assault. Now, the Tennessee and Jefferson rangers aren't part of your community and I am turning it over to Joe Jackson, if that is okay with you."

---

There was a murmur from the crowd. Finally, a voice called, "I nominate Joe Jackson for judge for this trial." Another voice seconded her and, when no one else was nominated, Joe was acclaimed.

---

Joe mounted the steps as Carlos descended them. The Tennessean gathered his men and Jimmy beckoned his rangers and they walked off towards the barn where they started a small fire to cook dinner.

---

As he was stirring potatoes in the skillet, Micah Blair stated, "Those guys just rode on in. Why didn't they have any scouts out? We've had it

thumped into our heads that we have to consider everyone an enemy until we marry them. It just doesn't make any sense."

---

Jason answered him by saying, "These guys have been living off the fat of the land since day one, I would guess. They never had a tough fight. When I talked to the original troopers from the Founding, they said the Mahdists were the same. They would charge in like they were going after a bunch of farmers."

---

"Zach and dad thought it was because they never had a challenge. They would always have overwhelming force against people who were still in a state of confusion from The Troubles. Remember, even the military broke up to get back home and a lot of them died of the bombs or plague."

---

Rudyard 'Poet' Kimmel lifted his hat from over his face. "Yeah, remember, Mitchell had to fight for its survival from the beginning. Zach knew that they were in a fight for survival. I remember Matt telling how Zach killed the three Mahdist prisoners after the first fight in Nebraska. These guys just haven't had to develop the same survival skills as Jefferson did, because there was never anyone stronger than them."

---

"Even this last move was to get out of the way of a bigger gang, rather than fight for their homes. If they had survived today, they would have been more careful in the future, but they didn't survive, so they didn't, and won't, learn."

---

While they were washing up, Joe came over to let them know what the verdict was. The five reavers had been found guilty. The vote had been overwhelming to hang the men, but there was less support for hanging the women. They decided to banish them.

---

Bill Travers was the leader of a vocal minority against executing any of them, but they had been overruled and the sentence would be carried out in the morning. When Carlos asked why the delay, Joe answered that Bill had asked for time to pray with the men.

---

Jason and Jimmy looked at each other and Corey muttered, "Want to bet they escape during the night?"

---

As Corey had predicted, the prisoners were missing the next morning. Outside the building in which they had been locked, was the body of Bill Travers. He had been stabbed multiple times. Any weapons he carried were

gone, including his knife. Joe and the rest of the hastily elected council asked Carlos and Jimmy to track the fugitives down and bring them back for justice.

---

They refused, telling the settlers that the Jefferson and Tennessee contingents were not responsible for the police work of the community. “If you want them, then you go get them,” said a disgusted Carlos. “You people are still too civilized for this world and until you learn, there is little hope for you. There should be representatives of the U.S. here in a week or two, if you survive that long.”

---

Jimmy had recorded a final message and hidden the rock near the barn in which they had slept. It reported the actions up until that point and their plans to pursue the Riverboat Reavers.

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## Chapter 5

## Scouting Party – Daniel

*Spring/Summer 2052*

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*Now that Jimmy and Jason are away, Daniel and his boys will be leaving tomorrow night. They will head east through Kentucky and Virginia. Lizzie made a scene, says Sarah. The young lady was pretty upset about David Benton being part of Daniel's ranger party. Apparently, she is going to marry David and doesn't want him on a dangerous mission. The only problem is, David hasn't a clue and that wouldn't stop him, anyway. Right now, he is busy with the Rangers and has expressed the notion that he is not ready to get married. All of that fuss with Lizzie sneaking away at the dance was just to get David's attention. Didn't work.*

---

*When I asked how Lizzie expects to get him to the altar, Sarah gave me one of those looks and I had enough sense to let it drop before she could remind me about our wedding plans. I am not sure it would work out the same if Lizzie just had the banns posted like Sarah did, but who knows. Karl and I are staying out if it, like good little husbands should. I know how much fatherly advice is worth in cases like this.*

---

*Now, Lizzie is moping around and David is irritated about getting kidded by his mates. I am glad I am not sixteen and in love.*

---

*It is a good thing he is leaving. Maybe we can get some peace.*

---

---

Daniel's party left the next evening, just before the moon rose. They traveled east and north, heading for the Kentucky border. They made good time for the first few days until they came to Somerset, where radio contact had been lost. They had no trouble tracking the party after that and began finding trail sign after the first day, when the expedition had realized that they lost radio contact. From Somerset, the trail led to Gate City where it headed northeast along the A P Carter Highway to beyond Maces Spring. There had been considerable damage to the roads from weather.

---

They made contact with a few families on out-of-the-way farms and in small villages. The towns had been pillaged and, mostly, burned. The families who did not run away, told tales of small gangs crisscrossing the roads and wreaking havoc.

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Robert Hogg, who was running point, held up his fist and crept forward around a small bend in the road. After a few minutes, he beckoned the rest of the party forward. Daniel joined Robert and the rest took up positions in the trees on either side of the road. Standing in the middle of the road was a sign. Under a crudely painted skull and crossbones was written, “WARNING! WARNING! Plague beyond this point. Anyone found past this sign will be quarantined.” It was signed, “Bob Colvert, Captain, 4<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Mounted Infantry” and “George Michael Lucas, Captain, 1<sup>st</sup> Kentucky Cavalry”.

---

As they finished reading the sign, a figure stepped out of the trees a dozen yards up the road. He hailed them and stepped back in surprise when the road suddenly emptied. Daniel, hidden behind a boulder, called out, “We’re the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers. Who are you?”

---

“Well, damn, boy. I’m Justin Carmoody. We’re the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee Rangers. What are you doing so far from home?” the other shouted back.

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Daniel and Robert eased onto the road as several more sentries joined Justin. Introductions were made and Daniel whistled for Alvin ‘Sergeant’ York to bring the rest of their party forward.

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“What’s this about the plague?” asked Daniel.

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Justin advanced up the road, causing the Jefferson rangers to start backing up. “Don’t worry. It’s run its course. Our medic has yanked the quarantine and we were on our way to ditch the sign when we saw ol’ Robert here looking it over.” With that, he wrestled the sign out of the ground.

---

The combined party walked back down the road. Daniel told his counterpart that they had been sent by Jackson to find them. He explained the theories concerning the three missing expeditions and what had happened to the first one.

---

“Hey, that’s bad. Ol’ Carpenter couldn’t handle it, huh? You say they got him when they escaped? Damn, him and Bob were friends, though a lot of us didn’t trust the scutter. Always trying to get ahead over the backs of others, you know what I mean?”

---

“I have a brother and a couple of cousins in the bunch heading for Atlanta. Hope they are all right. Ma’d feel bad if something happened to them. She ended up raising us together after The Troubles and all. Yep, right bad.”

---

They arrived at a spot overlooking farmland along a river. A road led to buildings on the near bank and a makeshift pier where several boats were moored. Across the river was a pasture where several dozen horses grazed. Two men, sentries, stepped out of a shed and greeted the party.

---

It took two trips to ferry everyone over. By the time the second was finished, horses had been roped and saddled. They rode through fields, until they came to a belt of woods. Turning left onto a farm road, they followed this around a small hill to a large group of buildings. Most of the structures looked fairly new and there was a low stone wall running from one tongue of woods, around the farm to another tongue of woods.

---

Daniel pointed out the sentries on the hill. He noticed that they had a good view of the countryside and an open field of fire. As he looked over the woods, Preston grinned and said, "It's only ten yards wide or so, but the settlers have planted berry vines throughout and it is well-nigh impenetrable. There are other farming communities up the valley, each a little fortress. The mountains and river protect them on one side and they have a good patrol system along the roads over the mountains on the other side."

---

"Good protection from reavers," observed Daniel, "but lousy against a virus."

---

"Yeah," admitted Preston. "I'm glad that the vaccine 'Doc' White came up with worked on this one. Not one of us got sick."

---

They rode in silence to the farm yard. The lawn surrounding the buildings was littered with people sitting in the sun. They turned a curious eye to the newcomers and a few waved.

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A harried young man appeared at the door of the largest structure and shaded his eyes with his hand. He stepped out, turned and assisted an older man down the steps to a chair.

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When he had the other settled in, he met the riders and was introduced as Orville Lansing, Lieutenant of the 4<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Troop. Daniel introduced his men and explained what they were doing in the area.

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Orville snorted, "I wish we had been lost. While we should be exploring and looking around, we have been playing nursemaid to a bunch of farmers. If I wanted to plow, I would have stayed in Tennessee and done my own."

---

A laugh sounded behind them and they turned to see a smiling man striding towards them. "Never mind Orville. He'd complain if you hung him with a new rope. I'm Bob Colvert, leader of this band of misfits. The State of Tennessee had no use for them, so they sent them out into the wide, cruel world."

---

They shook hands and he invited them into a small house built off to the side of the yard. "This is my office. What you fellers in Jefferson call the War Room, though it's more of a Sick Room. We've got troops up the valley helping out the scattered communities that have come down sick. The only good piece of news is that there haven't been any reaver incursions."

---

Daniel dismissed the men and he and Alvin relaxed in overstuffed chairs. He explained the reason for their appearance. "The State of Tennessee may have no use for you, but they still would like to know where you got lost at. Maybe they are concerned about the horses and equipment."

---

"That's too bad about Carp," the leader of the expedition said. "Sounds like he went off his rocker." Then, Bob slapped the arm of his chair as if to dismiss the topic and continued, "Well, it was like this. We were doing all right. Got into the mountains and lost radio contact, but I figured that was to be expected and we would find a peak and try again."

---

"A couple of weeks into the mountains and we met some folks. Not real friendly folks, mind you, but willing to talk. They warned us to leave. To satisfy them we turned north, up this valley. The scouts saw the farmland and we met some fellows who were in a bad way. They were sick and barely able to stand, and they were the healthiest."

---

"We figured that we had been infected by these fellows no matter what. Even the boys from Kentucky had had the White vaccine, so we decided it was our Christian duty to help out. That was three weeks ago. The plague has pretty much run its course and another week should see the earliest or mildest cases recovered enough to stand on their own. The risk of our infecting anyone is nil, too."

---

"Justin, George and I decided that we had been out of touch long enough and next Monday we were going to pack up and head out, sending the radio and the rangers ahead to contact the folks and let them know what happened. Howsomeever, with you and your men, you could leave

immediately and let them know earlier. What do you say?"

---

Daniel looked at Alvin and shrugged. "We'd be happy to do it except we were supposed to meet up with my brother and another group of rangers heading through Atlanta. We planned a rendezvous at the front gate of Camp Lejeune in North Carolina to see if they found the middle column."

---

Bob was disappointed, but took the refusal in good grace. Daniel was invited to stay as long as he needed to rest his men. He held a quick conversation with Alvin and decided that a two-day layover would give them time to repair equipment and lay in supplies. They were shown a building where they could billet and clean up. Their guide pointed out the communal dining hall and informed them that supper was being served in an hour.

---

After the luxury of long, hot showers, the Jeffersonians sat down to eat and be deluged with the names of the rest of the troopers and the civilians. The leader of the settlers was named Gus Jeckle who had a disconcerting habit of shutting his blind left eye when speaking and opening it wide when listening. Bob whispered to Daniel that he was the biggest liar in Virginia and proud of it.

---

"We want to form our own gov'mint, like you did. I'm not saying we want any part of being part of the United States, mind you. 'Cause the first thing we are gonna do is take back West Virginia. It was taken illegally by the Yankees, if you believe their version of the War of Secession, what they called a Civil War. They want to insist that it was a Civil War, then the Southern States were always a part of the U.S. and the Constitution said that no state can be subdivided without its permission. That permission was not given at the time and, if it was given later, it was coerced. Therefore, it stands that the organization of West Virginia was illegal and we Virginians claim it as part of our state or country or whatever," he bloviated.

---

Daniel did not want to argue with the man, though he could have pointed out that the original boundaries of states in the West had been rearranged to form the New United States. When Alvin started to say something, Daniel nudged him and said, "That's a battle for someone like Robert Agnello to fight. It is none of our business."

---

Gus seemed disappointed at not being challenged and fell to talking about the scattered communities up the valley. They had a loose defense

agreement with them and had been able to keep the reavers out of this part of the mountains. He would send out and see what they wanted to do about forming a state and rejoining the United States. About the other scattered settlements in the mountains he would only promise to send out runners and call for a convention to talk about the future.

---

There was a concert that night. This was the first community event since the plague swept the valley. The medics kept a close eye on their patients and ushered those to bed who showed signs of weariness. Even then, the gathering broke up early and Daniel and his men climbed gratefully into their beds.

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## Chapter 6

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### Rescue

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*Spring/Summer 2052*

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*Tomorrow I see a man about a horse. I told Eduardo that I would be on the lookout for some more breeding stock. He wants me to pick up a couple of mares on the smallish side. He has some idea of breeding a mountain horse, small but sturdy that can take the high trails. I told him he needed a deer crossed with a mule out of a mountain goat. However, he is sure that he can take one of our bigger mounts and breed down in size with a Morgan or Arab strain. Karl isn't too keen on the idea, but that may be because his is a big man and, like he said, 'End up carrying the animal rather than vice versa.'*

---

*Lizzie is still moping. She makes a pilgrimage to the War Room twice a day to see if there is any news. I have stopped telling her that we would be the first notified. Seems I have no luck at all having women listen to me. She does have a point. It has been several weeks now since the boys have been out. I was looking for a bit of news myself before this.*

---

Zach had just made a deal with the Tennessee breeder to trade a pair of his Percherons for a trio of smallish Morgan/Arab cross mares. There were not many of the huge work horses in Kentucky and the man thought he had gotten the best of the deal from Zach. On the other hand, The Ranch had a surplus of draft animals and the mares were ideal for what Eduardo planned. They both had a good laugh about Zach's initial reaction to the large horses he had trapped in the barn with Will and William Smith.

---

He headed up the street to the War Room. Regardless of what he had told Lizzie, he was getting concerned, too. Even knowing that three weeks was too short a time, he and Leo were mulling over taking a ride east, something Sarah would scalp him for suggesting.

---

"Uncle Zach! Uncle Zach!" came Lizzie's call. Startled, Zach looked up and saw the girl racing towards him. He braced himself for the collision as she skidded into him. "Uncle Zach, you have to go help him."

---

"Whoa, girl. Slow down. What's this all about, anyway?" Zach asked

the breathless Lizzie.

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“He’s asking for help! You have to go!”

---

Zach looked up the street expecting to see a scene of mayhem, but all was peaceful. “Come on, Lizzie. Take a deep breath and start at the beginning. Who needs help? Where is he and who is he?”

---

The girl gave her stepfather an exasperated look. “David! They just came in and they need help. You have to go, Uncle Zach, you have to.”

---

“Who just came in? Elizabeth, you aren’t making any sense.” He only called her by her formal name when he was irritated with her and she took a deep breath and spoke like a he was a five-year old.

---

“Two rangers. ‘Sly’ Fox and some other guy. They said they found the troopers from Tennessee, but they needed some help. You have to go help them, Uncle Zach.”

---

“Wait a minute. ‘Sly’ was with Jimmy and Jason. Did they meet up with Daniel? And, you know, Lizzie, I can’t just take off. They might not even want me.”

---

Lizzie stepped back with a look of shock on her tearstained face. “You mean you’re not going. Even for David. Uncle Zach, how could you!” She wheeled and ran towards their quarters. As he was about to follow her, another voice called his name.

---

He whirled, still upset about the encounter with Lizzie and snapped, “What!”

---

The trooper stopped in surprise at his greeting. “Um, the, uh, they want you at the War Room. I was sent to fetch you, sir.”

---

Zach apologized and waved the wary Tennessean on and they headed towards the War Room. Leo, Karl and Baxter Ashe were already there and Kevin Tollandson, Defense Director for Kentucky, and Ishtar came soon after. Baxter filled the others in on the report by the two rangers who had been sent off for a meal and rest.

---

Just as he finished, there was an impatient rapping on the door. One of the troopers assigned as runners opened it and had a short conversation with someone in the corridor. He turned and said, “Mr. Banducci, sir, there is someone to see you. It’s your wife.”

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Kevin smiled knowingly and said, “That’s okay, Zach, I saw Lizzie stop you in the street. We’ll wait.”

---

Puzzled, Zach stepped into the corridor and saw immediately that Sarah was upset. She rounded on her husband and said, “Oh, Zach, how could you!”

---

Keeping his temper with difficulty he returned, “You know, I am about sick and tired of all these cryptic accusations. First Lizzie and now you. Can’t either of you speak just plain English?”

---

“Lizzie just ran into the house crying and saying that you wouldn’t help David when he was in trouble. I’m sorry. I thought she knew what she was talking about.”

---

With the tension easing, Zach sketched for her the news the two rangers had delivered. “So you see, David is not even part of this. Jimmy wants us to mobilize some troops so they can rescue the reaver prisoners.”

---

He held up his hands, “And for your information, I won’t volunteer and I won’t be drafted. They have Leo and Karl and Ishtar and a whole lot of people more competent than me to run this thing. So don’t worry.”

---

Sarah compressed her lips and kicked a chair. She turned to him after the piece of furniture had stopped skidding. “You know that I am going to be the one she blames, don’t you?”

---

Zach threw his hands up in exasperation. “Blame you for what?”

---

“If something happens to David and you don’t go, she will blame me. And even if you tell her that you were the one deciding not to go and I tell you that you can, she will still believe that it was because of me you stayed.”

---

Having trouble trying to follow the convoluted sentence, Zach simply said, “She’ll get over it.”

---

“Of course she’ll get over it, but she won’t forget it. Oh, damn,” she spat. Zach was surprised at the outburst. Sarah took pride in not swearing, even a little.

---

“It’s too complicated. You have business to take care of,” she said distractedly pointing to the door of the War Room. “I’ll tell you tonight. You have to go, Lizzie is depending on you. Heaven knows why every young female thinks you are the god Mars. First it was the Appleton boys’ wives and



now it is Lizzie.

---

“But you listen to me, buster, you had better not get yourself hurt. And look after Leo and Karl, too. I don’t want to explain to their wives how my husband let them get killed or something.”

---

There was a rumble from behind the door that could only have come from Ishtar Singh. Sarah glared at the offending door and added, “And him, too. That Indian bear. And especially David. I don’t care if you have to wrap him in bubble wrap, but just keep him from getting hurt.” With that she whirled and strode down the hall towards the front door, her back ramrod straight.

---

Zach reached behind him, shaking his head in wonderment. He pushed the door open and almost knocked his three friends over. When he stepped in the room, Ishtar was posturing. “I think of myself as more of an Indian tiger. But there is no need to contradict your good wife, friend Zach.”

---

Meanwhile, Leo was circling Zach staring at his waist. “What are you doing, anyway?” Zach asked.

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“Just looking for the apron strings I’m going to be tied to, papa,” he replied.

---

Zach gave him a disgusted look and said, “Can we just get on with planning this thing. I want to get out of here.”

---

No sooner had he bent over the plastic covered AAA map of the Middle Atlantic States then he threw down his grease pencil and turned on Leo. “Do you still have the key to your cabin above Steamboat Springs?”

---

Leo was surprised at the question, but answered affirmatively.

---

“Good. I want it after we are done on this side of the Mississippi. I’m going to find a friendly family of badgers, go there with them and have some peace. I’m sure I’ll understand them more than I do women!”

---

They decided to follow the route of Daniel’s rangers on the way to the coast. Since the reavers were heading north, it was assumed that they would stop somewhere around Willmington, NC. With this route, they could pick up Daniel and the combined expedition, if it had been found, and head for the Atlantic coast.

---

The make-up of the rescue mission would consist of two contingents;

the main body would include the 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> from Tennessee the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Rangers of Kentucky, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Rangers provided by Jefferson, Ishtar Singh led the 19<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Rangers from Palo Duro. It also included the Texans' 12<sup>th</sup> Rangers and 5<sup>th</sup> Scouts. The second body, which would form a reserve and follow a day behind the main column, consisted of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Jefferson, 26<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro, 5<sup>th</sup> Arkansas and the 4<sup>th</sup> Mississippi. The rest of the troops, both Kentuckians and non-Kentuckians would be utilized to guard the Missouri and Caliphate borders to prevent a surprise attack from those directions. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Kansas and the 1<sup>st</sup> Arkansas Rangers would keep an eye on Missouri, since they had a relationship with Gabriel.

---

Commands were issued to the troop leaders to be ready to ride by noon on the following day. The reserve column would take the extra day to load wagons with supplies and spare equipment.

---

The overall leader of the expedition would be Baxter Ashe, with the rest of the advisors and state representatives as an advisory council. The reserves would be led by Bobby Preston of Louisiana. They would leave a string of radio posts as they traveled, thus hoping to keep in communication with the reserves and the governments.

---

That evening Zach stepped through the door to a wildly ecstatic Lizzie who kept up a steady stream of chatter all through the evening. Sarah expressed their relief when she finally went to bed. Sarah, after checking that the household had bedded down for the night, sat Zach down and explained Edna March's concerns about Lizzie. Though he did not pretend to understand the whole thing, he understood Sarah's concerns. He kissed her and promised to keep everyone safe and bring David home.

---

The next day, the troop leaders inspected their men and final good-byes were said. Baxter had his bugler blow a call and ordered the screen of Rangers to move out. An hour later the long train began to unwind and follow.

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## Chapter 7

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### Up the Coast

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*Spring/Summer 2052*

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*I wonder where we will meet Jimmy and Daniel's scouts. I tend to agree with Leo that they are probably getting themselves into some kind of trouble, especially if Jason gets the bit between his teeth.*

---

*Poor Lizzie. Edna thinks that she is so fixated on David that if something happens to him, she will put on black and mourn for the rest of her life. However, if David comes back with three wives and a dozen children, she will get over it and move on. I don't know, it must make sense to the skull doctors, but not to me.*

---

*Ishtar Singh is as excited as I have ever seen him. I guess that he is overjoyed that he will finally be in at the start rather than the tail end of an operation. The only thing that concerns me is the festive atmosphere of the troopers. They seem to think this will be a walk in the park. Maybe we are succumbing to the 'Mahdist Fever' where we have been so successful that we get cocky and overconfident. I know that Karl and Leo are worried about it, too. They have been honing the boys' skills in the evenings.*

---

*We have won so far because we have been aware of our limitations and the fact that if we lose once, we are gone.*

---

After leaving Toccoa, the rangers headed for the coast. They left the three drivers back in the settlement. They were willing to go, but they would have slowed the rest down. They were used to riding and had not had the woodcraft training necessary for the job at hand. One of them, Sammy Poletti, had been Training Sergeant before the last class of recruits had graduated. He would be in charge of whipping the 1<sup>st</sup> Georgia Mounted Infantry Troop into shape.

---

The rest left a trail of message stones as they moved east and north. After a few days, they struck straight east and reached the coast south of Wilmington, NC and found no sign of the reavers. After some discussion, they decided to head for Camp Lejeune to meet Daniel and warn him about

the impending danger.

---

They took US17 north with frequent excursions to the coast to see if they had caught up with the reavers. After several days, Carlos indicated smoke to the north. It was a sure sign of reaver activity, unless it was a lightening caused fire. They left US17 at Snead's Ferry Road and approached the town on the south side of the bridge. They looked in the direction of the Marine Corps camp and saw three riverboats tied up on the opposite bank. There was a firefight in progress and fires were raging in the base housing.

---

There were a dozen men on each of the boats. Machine gun emplacements had been built on the upper decks. The lower deck had sandbags and more machine guns. As they were studying the layout, one of the guns began firing into the camp. Jimmy saw that a group of men and women had been trying to escape and were cut down.

---

The volume of fire from the base lessened and turned sporadic. An hour later, a line of prisoners of both sexes and all ages were escorted to the riverside. As the rangers watched, they were divided into two groups. The larger body was moved to the boats and the others were gunned down.

---

"That's cold," whispered Cassius Brown.

---

Another hour passed and a line of prisoners was led down the gangplank. They were shackled together in groups and marched into LeJeune. They had to walk with a swinging gait. Once in the camp, they were split up and for the next few hours, the town was stripped of anything usable.

---

An hour before darkness fell, a dozen prisoners carried cooking equipment to an open area and began building fires and preparing a meal. The last load of plunder was carried aboard and the workers were allowed to sit.

When the food was ready, the guards ate first, then the rest were kicked into line and they shuffled past taking a bowl and dipping it into the pots. They ate with their fingers. When they had finished eating, they were taken in groups to a nearby building, presumably to complete whatever toilette they were allowed.

---

After the prisoner groups were fastened together, they were left under the watchful eyes of a half dozen guards.

---

Carlos and Jimmy led the men away to a small restaurant on the south edge of town. They made sure that the curtains would completely cover the windows before they lit a small fire in a tin bucket.

---

The somber group quietly prepared their own meal before anyone spoke. Jason slammed his tin cup to the ground and spat, “Those bastards. I would like to go in and wipe them out. I say we get across the river and take the guards and get those slaves out of there. Anyone with me?”

---

A chorus of assent greeted his challenge. Jimmy said quietly, “And how far do you think we would get, Jase? Those people don’t look like they could take a hard march in chains and that is what we would have on our hands. The reavers are well-fed and rested and would be all over us an hour after we got away. That is, if we got away.

---

“Look, there are a dozen of us. The guards are scattered all around the prisoners and we would have to take them all at once. And silently. Even with the silencers, all it would take is a chance for one of them to make a sound. I don’t think we are good enough to take them all down at the same instance and make all the shots kills.

---

“Well, Jase? The rest of you? Now, I want to pull those people out, too. But I want to do it smart and right. My plan is to send two runners back to Kentucky to meet whoever is out there. Daniel would be good, him with the missing expedition would be better, but them and a dozen troops, with heavy weapons led by ‘Sly’ and Pete, would be best of all.

---

“The rest of us will track these guys and get the lay of the land. When

we've got the troops, then we nail them."

---

Carlos lit a crude cigar and nodded. The rest grudgingly agreed. With two sentries, the rest bedded down on the floor to wait for morning.

---

The sentries woke the sleeping rangers at false dawn. With the usual grumbling, they ate MREs and packed their gear. Jimmy and Carlos had chosen Jason and Donald Stuebin as the two rangers to look for Daniel. The two were preparing to leave when a sentry, Sam Horton, brought in a stranger. She was wet from swimming the river and her red hair was plastered to her head and formed a thick, wet rope down her back. Her t-shirt was covered by Sam's jacket and water was dripping from her jeans onto the plastic flipflops she wore.

---

Sam handed over a twelve-inch kitchen knife to Carlos. "I saw her sneak off one of the boats and swim over," he reported. Carlos thanked him and dismissed him back to his post.

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"At least you could feed me," the prisoner said, defiantly.

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Jason tossed her an MRE and called out to Tom Gordon, "Tom, you got an extra pair of pants?"

---

The ranger tossed over a rolled up pair of jeans. Jason turned to the girl, "Get changed, you can eat on the way."

---

"What?" she asked.

---

"Are those guys going to follow you?" Carlos asked.

---

"Well, probably, I guess," she answered.

---

"Then we have got to get moving and now," Jimmy called. "We leave in five minutes." He turned to the dazed and dripping prisoner, "You'd had better get changed, lady or you get wrapped in a tarp and carried."

---

Indignantly she snapped, "My name is not 'lady', its Jody Lannon."

---

Jimmy snapped back, "I don't care if it is Joan of Arc. Get out of those dripping clothes." He threw her a towel and a spare, somewhat clean shirt and pointed to kitchen area. "The rest of you, set up a perimeter in case they are hot on her heels."

---

Jody stormed to the kitchen and came back in a few minutes holding up her pants and carrying her wet clothes wrapped in some plastic she found. Tom was the smallest ranger in the group, but his pants were still too large for the

girl. Donald cut a length of rope off a coil he carried and handed it to her for a belt.

---

Within the allotted time, the rangers and Jody left the restaurant by the back door and hurried down Snead's Ferry Road. They crossed the intersection with Middleton and followed a deer trail into the trees. Jason erased all traces of their passage and the rangers and their guest moved deeper into the forest until they found a small clearing where they stopped to rest.

---

Jason, Jimmy and Carlos set the sentries and then sat down with Jody who was just finishing her meal. "Gosh, that stuff is disgusting," she declared, stuffing the wrapping into the outer bag.

---

Jimmy handed over a pack of gum he had found under the restaurant counter. "It may be a little stale," he apologized.

---

Carlos asked her to explain how she managed to escape and why more of the prisoners did not try.

---

Jody blushed at the question and took a deep breath. "Okay. What happened is that I was called to Jake's cabin. He and the others had been drinking and Jake gets, well, anyway, he called for me. He was pretty drunk and he has trouble, you know, when he's drinking and he got mad and took a swing at me.

---

"He got tangled in his pants," she hesitated, still blushing furiously. "Do I have to go on?"

---

"Just get to the important parts," Jimmy said, putting his arm around her shoulders. "You can skip anything embarrassing, like."

---

Jason hid a grin as the girl continued, "He tripped and knocked himself out. I got his knife and, and stabbed him a couple of times in the neck. There was a lot of blood. Then I grabbed his gun and stuck it in my waistband and crawled out the window. There was no one looking on that side of the boat and I climbed over the rail and dropped into the water and swam ashore, halfway across the gun slipped out of my pants, and then the guard found me."

---

Jason asked, "Was this Jake guy important?"

---

Jody compressed her lips and nodded. "He was in charge of a crew."

---

The rest of the rangers not on duty had gathered around. "You mean a boat?" asked someone.

---

"No, a crew. This guy, Lafitte, thinks he is the reincarnation of some pirate.

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His men are organized into what he calls ‘Crews’. Thirty men make up a crew, three crews on each ship. Plus a royal crew for Lafitte’s boat,” Jody answered.

---

“This Lafitte and his brothers were pirate’s down around New Orleans a couple of hundred years ago,” ‘Poet’ said, “He was a big help in the War of 1812. I remember Karl or Zach telling some kind of story about him.”

---

“History lesson later, fellas,” interrupted Carlos. He turned to the girl and asked, “Where are these guys going? Do you know?”

---

She said, “What I know about these guys is just from what I’ve heard since I was captured outside of Lawrenceville, GA. The boats came from Mobile, AL. They were casinos before the bombs and plagues. Lafitte and his gang found them after they had escaped from New Jerusalem. The story is that they were going to find a ship and head for Cuba or Haiti or some other island.

---

“When they got to Mobile, they only found these boats in dry storage in some warehouse by the river. They re-floated them and decided to make them their headquarters. They recruited more men and used captives to work for them, farming and raising animals and doing the scavenging. They worked both sides of the river until they met up with some crazy scavengers with lots of tattoos out of Louisiana. I mean, Jake and the others said they were crazy. They would charge and keep charging until they were all dead or had killed everyone.”

---

The rangers exchanged glances. These were the Louisiana reavers they had beaten several years ago.

---

Jody continued, “A couple of years ago, those guys disappeared, but others showed up and seemed to want to kill all scavengers. Things got so bad that Lafitte decided to leave Mobile and head for Florida. They loaded up everything they could, killed all of the slaves there wasn’t room for and left. They would travel as far as they could with the supplies they had and then tie up and raid and replenish their supplies. Usually, they stayed in one place for a month or two, sometimes they leave early when the locals get organized or stay longer like when they found the Muslims on the east coast near Jacksonville. They would capture as many people as they needed for work gangs, pillage and kill everyone else they found.

---

“As long as we did the work assigned, we were let to live, but if someone got



hurt or didn't do their job well, then they were killed," with that she started to cry and hid her face in her hands.

---

Jimmy came to her defense immediately. "Give her some room, you guys," he said, leading her away to the other side of the camp. He sat her on a fallen log and patted her shoulder in sympathy until she had cried herself out. After a while she dried her eyes and came back to finish her story.

---

"Anyway, they were on their way to the Marine Base here. I guess they thought it would be a fort or something. Now, they are talking about going to New York and taking over West Point. When we got here two days ago, there was already a colony of people and they didn't want anything to do with us. It took two days to beat them. They brought the survivors near the boats and killed the ones they couldn't use, even little kids and are using the rest for slaves.

---

"They will probably stay here for a month, but not right here, 'cause of the bodies. Probably upstream where there are buildings and lots of trees."

---

They thanked Jody for the information and the three leaders huddled to see if their plan of last evening still made sense. The escape of the girl complicated things since they would have to stay out of the way of search parties. Jason argued that going to find Daniel and his party was still a good idea. The expedition would certainly have radios. They would be able to determine if 'Sly' had made it back and organized a rescue party and direct it to where they were.

---

He had tremendous faith in his brother and could not conceive that Daniel had not found the Tennessee/Kentucky expedition. Carlos and Jimmy agreed and Jason and Don Steubin packed and left within the hour. They headed towards the Virginia border, hoping to pick up signs of Daniel's rangers.

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## Chapter 8

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### Brothers Meet

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*Spring/Summer 2052*

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*I am getting a little concerned. This trip has been plagued by problems. The horses stampeded during a storm and it took us hours to round them up. The only reason we didn't have the reserve column on our tail is because their wagons have been stuck to the roads and these have been either cut by runoff or buckled with the bad winters. They can't take side roads, since these are even worse. So they are left with building bridges or carrying the supplies across and then carrying the wagons. I can see why armies have Corps of Engineers. Another note that will get buried among all the others.*

---

*There have been discipline problems with the troopers. I hate to say it, but the other states' troops have not had the training or experience ours have had and there have been grumblings and several fights. Karl was forced to bring in the other leaders and lay down the law. Since then he has had a free hand and, though the grouching has been worse, the problems have lessened. Some of Karl and Leo's punishments have been, to say the least, creative. Running in full gear has been the least of it.*

---

*Ishtar Singh suggests that a few judicious public executions would be a big help and I don't know if he is kidding and if I don't agree with him after breaking up a fight that earned me a fat lip and the miscreants an hour of frog marching. I had never seen this before, but the troopers were put in a squat position, they held their rifles in front of their knees and they had to keep this position while they marched. I don't know if all the trouble is the weather or state rivalry or what.*

---

*We finally reached the mountains and set up our first radio station. Over my objections, five men from different states' troops were left under the command of one of them. I saw nothing but disaster coming from this. I can't imagine how these guys would get along by themselves when they didn't do it under command supervision. Karl and some of the others said that it would kill or cure them.*

---

*We met several civilians who told us that both the lost expedition and*

*Daniel's rangers had left evidence of their passage. An old man showed us where the trail signs had been left and we began to follow them, leaving radio stations along the way. We determined their location by marking where the last clear communication was, sending a crew back and setting up the station there when the next try failed.*

---

*With as slow as we are going, the Reserves are even slower. The one good thing is that the radio network is functioning properly. Too, properly, in fact. I keep getting messages from Lizzie about David. I am going to make sure that pup marries her if I have to paint a shotgun white myself.*

---

*Anyway, tomorrow we declare another day of rest to meet with some locals and give the Reserve a chance to catch up a little.*

---

Daniel woke the next morning to someone outside the window shouting, "Hey, who are you and what do you think you're doing?"

---

The smell of coffee brought Daniel out of bed in a hurry. He pulled on pants and a shirt and pushed open the door of the cabin to see a sentry standing over a man squatting by a fire, coffeepot in one hand and chipped ceramic cup in the other. The shaggy hair and ragged beard could not hide the stranger's identity and Daniel leapt off the porch with a cry. His brother, Jason, returned the hug trying not to spill hot coffee on his excited sibling.

---

A pile of blankets on the porch sat up and fell away from Donald Steuben's face. "Thanks for letting me sleep," came a snarl. He rose and took the cup from Jason's hand.

---

"What's going on here, Tony?" Bob asked the puzzled sentry who stood watching. He had heard the cry and came to investigate, buckling on his gun belt.

---

"When I came on duty, Bob, the tall guy was sitting over this fire, making coffee. Then Dan Appleton came out and grabbed him and they started dancing around. Then this other guy came off the porch. I think its Don Steubin, but it's hard to tell with the beard."

---

By this time, the rest of the Jefferson rangers had joined in the noisy greeting. Bob dragged Daniel away and asked him to explain what was going on.

---

"That's my brother, Jason. He was with the other rangers that went

through Atlanta. I don't recognize the other one. We were going to meet him by Camp Lejeune, remember?"

---

Bob put two fingers to his lips and blew a sharp blast. The celebration died immediately and everyone turned to the Tennessean. "Break it up. Jason, you and your friend come with me, please. Dan, will you join me?" he asked. Observing the other's dress, he added, "After you get some shoes on, that is. Over at the War Room."

---

They were gathered a few minutes later, the seven attendees crowding the room. Jason and Don were on a pair of chairs near the desk behind which Bob was sitting. Gus was seated in the most comfortable chair that Alvin Caine surrendered after a few pointed comments from the civilian leader. Daniel leaned against the wall opposite the door and Orville perched on an arm of Gus' seat.

---

Bob opened the meeting by slapping his desktop. "For those who haven't met them, this is Jason Appleton, brother to Daniel and Don Steuben from the Tennessee Rangers. They got into camp last night. Jason was with a group of rangers assigned to look for the Tennessee expedition traveling around Atlanta. Sort of like Daniel was looking for us.

---

"Don, I suppose you tell us what this is all about."

---

Don outlined the history of the expedition, how they met up with the Georgia refugees, the fight with the reavers and how Jason connected with them. He told of the happenings in Toccoa Valley and their subsequent march up the coast in search of the reavers. The actions they observed when the reavers took the camp and Jody Lannon's tale.

---

Jason raised his hand and said, "There are about ninety fighters to a boat. They have machine guns and some other heavier weapons, maybe mortars and bazookas, from the description. We hope you have a radio so we can call dad for some help. These guys are as bad as they come and they should be stopped.

---

"Besides, there are slaves on each ship as black gang, workers and skags. We know that they have some of the other expedition that they captured. The slaves don't last long and it doesn't take much to get killed."

---

Bob made a suggestion that they call George Lucas and Justin Carmoody and have a real war council. The others agreed and runners were

sent to the other settlements.

---

The Jefferson rangers exchanged stories while they were waiting for the gathering. Daniel observed that Bob Agnello and his staff were going to be pretty busy for the next year getting the Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas and Virginia settlements organized and ready to join the new United States, if those groups were interested. Daniel also had his men get their equipment together for, regardless of the decisions of the Tennessee and Kentucky contingents, they were heading for Camp Lejeune.

---

Bob called the meeting to order and outlined the situation, calling on Don and Jason to answer any questions. George drawled, when the story had been told, “What are we doing talking about this whole thing. There ain’t but one thing to do, is there?”

---

The rest of the participants gave their whole-hearted agreement and there was a general movement towards the door. Bob brought them all to a halt with another of his ear-piercing whistles.

---

“Now that we have a consensus, let’s look at the logistics. Gus and his folks still haven’t fully recovered from the plague. I don’t want to see these people having relapses and dying on us, do you?” he said. This brought a murmur of agreement and everyone sat back down.

---

Bob continued, “Daniel and Jason and I spoke briefly about this before the rest of you got here. We would like to propose this: the radio and two men head back out of the mountains and contact Kentucky and find out where everyone is and call them to the coast. We assume that there are around three hundred and sixty to four hundred of these reavers. We aren’t enough of us to more than sting them and we would lose in a standup fight. From what Jason and Don say, they are a lot more disciplined and capable than the run-of-the-mill reavers. The fifty or so of us and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee Rangers and the Jefferson boys are going to do the scouting and intel gathering until the rest of ‘em get here.

---

“We leave six men here in the valley to hunt and assist Gus and his folks, three from the 8<sup>th</sup> Kentucky and three from 4<sup>th</sup> Tennessee. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee Rangers will provide the radiomen. The rest of us leave in two hours, at 1:00 o’clock this afternoon.”

---

Gus raised his hand and was recognized. “We do appreciate all the

help, never doubt that, and we are still a little unsteady on our pins so the offer to leave a couple of your boys here is welcome. Now, you know, we aren't the onlyest folks in these hills. There's a couple of other groups scattered here and about. Give us three or four days and I could have, oh, two or three hundred men loaded for bear."

---

Bob thanked the old mountaineer and encouraged him to 'call up the troops', but to wait for the rest of the rescue expedition to arrive and join them. He pointed out that even a couple of hundred extra men would not give them numerical superiority and would just make a larger body to feed and hide from the wide-ranging reavers. Secretly, he doubted that Gus could come through with his promise.

---

George and Justin left to organize their men. Bob promised to send a man to the next settlement up-valley, if the Kentuckians would do the same and leave two at the farthest. He called his men together and asked for volunteers.

---

At first no one stepped forward, but finally one red-faced trooper raised his hand. There was general laughter at this. John Middleton had taken special interest in one family. The father had died and John had been assigned to assist them. He and the eldest daughter had formed an attachment and were talking of getting married.

---

Another man, a grizzled old-timer, one the drivers raised his hand. "I won't be much use in a 'duck and run' style fight with my bum leg. I don't suppose you will be taking the wagons, so I might as well stay where I can do some good."

---

Bob finally had to have the rest of the troopers draw cards from a hat and the lowest cardholder stayed. The remaining men were told to get their equipment and be ready to ride.

---

The rangers and their radio equipment set out as soon as they were ready and at 1:15, the party was set to go. Jason, Don and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee Rangers formed a cordon in front of the rest of the column and Daniel and his men brought up the rear. Mules had been donated by the settlers to carry provisions.

---

They made good time and met two of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee Rangers outside of Greenboro, which surprised Jason. The rangers led them to a camp

hidden in the center of Eno River State Park. After introductions and greetings, the leaders sat down while the troopers set up camp.

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“Carlos,” Jason asked before they were even settled, “what are you doing back here?”

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“Come on, Jase,” answered Carlos. “The reavers were sending out parties all the way to Raleigh. If we didn’t want to get caught up in one of their sweeps we had to fall back. They don’t search parks and such, just towns and farms where they can get supplies and slaves.” The 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee all looked drawn and tired.

---

Carlos cleared a space on the ground and drew a rough sketch. “Here’s the river. Jody was right; they left the Camp Lejeune spot and moved upriver past the bridge to the next town. There are still dock facilities. The next day, they moved one boat to this side of the river and they have three gangs, about thirty slaves and thirty guards logging off the forest. Jody said for firewood to run the steam engines on the riverboats.

---

“Okay, they sent out one long-range party and two short-range scavenging parties on this side of the river. Three more long-range parties and two other short-range ones headed out on the other. Each group is thirty-some fighters on horses and ten or so slaves. The long-range parties gather up any locals they find, killing some, enslaving others. They gather what supplies they find and herd everyone back to the river. These groups will be gone for three or four days at a time. There has been some resistance, but the reavers are pretty efficient about stomping it out.

---

“Last week a bunch of them rode up to Raleigh to scavenge. They found a pretty big settlement. There was a firefight and it was Camp Lejeune all over again. They are there now looting and, well, they are there now.”

---

Jimmy spoke up when Carlos had finished. “Jody says that they will leave one ship on the side of the river where the wood cutting party is until they have their supply of fuel. Then, another ship will take its place until all are full. When they are ready to leave, they will all stop to top off, kill the slaves they can’t take with them and sail to another destination. They are on their second ship, now.

---

“Jody says we have another three to four weeks. She thinks the reavers will be staying around a little longer here because they will want to

really search the base.”

---

Jason grinned. “Jody seems to be saying a lot. You’ve had to interrogate her a lot, haven’t you? Probably morning and night. Anyone else had a chance, huh?”

---

He turned at a sound behind him and the smile faded as he saw Jody standing there, her face white and a hand covering her mouth. The tray she had been carrying was lying on the ground at her feet. She whirled and ran from the camp with Jimmy, muttering curses, chasing her.

---

“Nice move, Jason,” his older brother said in mild disgust. “At least you can clean up the mess.”

---

Jason shrugged his shoulders in embarrassment and began to pick up the tray and cups.

---

The next several days were spent in shadowing the reavers and alerting any locals before they could be caught in the net. The civilians were moved out of harm’s way. The North Carolinians who were young enough and willing were being organized into troops and drilled and coached. There were calls to take the fight to the reaver gang but the leaders of the western troops refused to participate until Zach, Leo and the rest arrived with more men. After a few attacks which ended in disaster, the Carolinians grumbled, but followed orders to stay away from trouble.

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They debated whether to send someone around to warn others about the reavers, but decided not to split their forces. When the reavers finished with Raleigh, the camp was moved to the game lands west of the river and the reaver camp.

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## Chapter 9

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### Plan of Action – Phase 1

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*Spring/Summer 2052*

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*Finally, the weather has cleared. The Reserve column has gotten back on track and we are moving again. We met a couple of Tennessee Rangers who came from the missing expedition and were going to try and get communications reestablished with Jackson, TN or Hopkinsville, KY. It appears that they never tried the radio after they lost communications or they would have contacted us on the way.*

---

*Anyway, they say they have met Daniel and Jason, of all people. The expedition is heading towards Camp LeJeune where the reavers are and are waiting for us. At least we have a destination!!!!*

---

*We also met some Virginians who will march with us. I am sure they are skilled woodsman and marksmen, but we don't need another bunch of cowboys who can't take orders. There are about a hundred of them and they are spoiling for a fight. Said someone named Gus sent them.*

---

*With the news that action is near, Ishtar Singh wants to get at the reavers before they are all killed. I hope that Daniel can hold off any attack until we get there or Ishtar may have a fit.*

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*We radioed the Reserves that they are to come up as soon as possible and we are leaving small contingents to guide them in when we finally reach where we are going.*

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The troops broke camp after the day of rest and soon after they started, two men were brought in. They were two rangers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee who had been sent by Bob Colvert to make contact and guide the relief column. Leo asked if they had tried the radio lately and they said they had not. He laughed, shook his head in disgust and rode on. Zach agreed with him, but thought crying was more appropriate for the snafu's which seemed to be piling up. They would have been in contact days ago if they had only tried the radio.

---

Karl communicated with the Reserve column and filled them in, encouraging them to put on as much speed as they were able and to relay the news that the last Tennessee column had been found and were in good condition.

---

A few miles further on, they met a group of Virginians who offered to join them. Zach was against it. There had already been too many discipline problems with their own men and he did not want to add a bunch of civilians to the mix. Baxter Ashe, ever the politician, overruled him and welcomed them. He assigned Karl to work with them to get organized into units, elect officers and take inventory of their weaponry.

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Two days later, they met David Benton and Sam Horton who had been waiting to guide them to camp. David was left with two rangers from the 5<sup>th</sup> Texas Scouts to lead in the reserves.

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The rest of the column moved out and made their way south. Leo and some of the other leaders convinced Baxter to halt the column and set up a temporary camp. They pointed out that until they had a clear picture of the situation, they should not blunder around. This way, the men could rest, wait for the reserves and a plan could be developed.

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Zach, Leo, Karl and the 10<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro Rangers were led to the where Carlos and Jimmy had set up their headquarters. David brought them up to speed on the way. They were stopped by several sentries from the local troops and finally by John Fratelli and Kendall Pike.

---

There was a joyful reunion between Leo and his sons. In the excitement of greeting the newcomers and getting them settled, Jimmy took Zach aside. As he hemmed and hawed, Zach grew impatient and snapped at him to get to the point.

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“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “Um, you are still a Justice of the Peace, aren’t you?”

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“What?” Zach said in surprise. “Is there some sort of problem here? If someone needs a trial, just banish him yourself or hang him, if it’s that serious.”

---

“No, you don’t understand. We, I mean, I don’t need anything legal, well, not criminal legal, that is.”

---

“Look, Jimmy. I really don’t have time for this, old son. What is it

you are trying to say? Use small words and short sentences, okay?” Zach said, impatiently.

---

Jimmy took a deep breath and plunged ahead, “Zach, Jody and I want to get married. She says that all her family is, um, gone and I am an orphan, too, so there isn’t anyone to wait for to have a wedding for. She wants it and I want it and there isn’t any reason not to go through with it, is there?”

---

“So much for short sentences. You want to marry some girl just before you go into a fight? Why don’t we send her back and you can get married after this is over and take a nice long honeymoon?” Even as he said it, he knew that there was little chance of his advice being heeded. He held up a hand to forestall the argument and turned back to where the rest of the officers were gathered.

---

“Gentlemen, there will be a short delay before we can start our meeting,” he said to the gathering. “JODY, JODY LANNON,” he called. The men started grinning when they saw the panicked look on Jimmy’s face. A movement in the crowd soon had the young lady in question pushed into the circle.

---

“You wanted it,” Zach whispered to Jimmy as he positioned the groom and beckoned the bride. During his tenure as Justice of the Peace, Zach had performed enough wedding ceremonies to have the words committed to memory. They brought Jason up as best man and Marion Castle, by virtue of his name, was the man of honor. Leo gave the girl away.

---

After the ‘I do’s were said and the marriage blessed with a short prayer from Leo, the new Mrs. Gunderson was applauded and cheered. Jimmy shook hands and fended off the wedding guests who insisted on kissing the bride until Bob Colvert called for order. He turned the meeting over to Carlos and Jimmy.

---

A whiteboard had the layout of the reever camp and areas of activity drawn on it. The situation was quickly outlined and several plans of action were presented. Leo had spoken briefly with his sons and he stood in front of the map.

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“The trick of this is to take them all in a clean sweep. We can’t do it piecemeal, because they may just kill the prisoners and float away. Oh, sure, we can probably clean up the scavenger parties and maybe the logging party,

but causing a stir and then trying to get the boats without killing everyone on board is the tough nut we are going to have to crack.

---

“As I see it we have four targets and I’ll take them in order of difficulty.

---

“One, the far-ranging scavenging parties. They are pretty isolated. We have or will have around four hundred men plus the locals and the Virginians. There are four groups of twenty-five to thirty guards. Forty of our troopers and as many civilians to take each of these groups. They are out for three to seven days at a time and won’t be missed for a week.

---

“Two, the short-ranging scavenging parties. There are about eighty rangers and scouts. Twenty to each of the local scavengers and whatever civilians who do a lot of hunting and stalking. These men would be equipped with silencers. If they can be taken out and avoid a noisy fight, we may be able to spring a surprise on the three boats on the far bank.

---

“Three, the wood cutting party. 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Troop and the other troops, who should be back from taking care of problem number one. The tricky part of this is the boat anchored offshore. We have to take that at the same time. Here’s where Zach and the snipers come in. They are only cutting wood that is smaller than two feet across. The trees are mostly pine and it is too wet to split in the time they have, so they leave the bigger trees. From what Carlos says, there is a stand of the larger trees near the shore which the boat is tied up to. If we can get Zach to keep the sound down to a small elephant herd, he and his sharpshooters can set up a blind and pick off the machine gunners and anybody else who may be trouble.” He smiled at the laughter this brought. It was well known that Zach was not much of a woodsman. The target of his jibes took it good-naturedly and motioned him to continue.

---

“All right, I have saved the best for last. There is no way to get close to the other three boats. They have pretty much finished what the fire started. The majority of the debris has been cleared and dumped in the river. It is a killing field. Unless Karl has a better idea, I suggest that we trap them on the river. Set up a boom at the bridge and bottle them up. We set up strong points on the bridge and use the snipers to keep them bottled up. The downside to this is that the slaves are at their mercy and they will probably be killed or

used as hostages. This will not happen, I repeat, not happen.

---

“The only good thing is that most of the slaves are off the boats during the days.

---

“The minute these guys get away, they will start this all over again. General March was pretty bad, but I see this Lafitte fellow as a lot worse. Better organizational skills and he has access to some sophisticated equipment, judging from what Miss Jody has described to us.”

---

He sat down and Karl asked for any questions. When these had all been answered, the representative from the local civilian population, Robert Jordan, stood. He was a grim looking man with a short black beard. His face looked like it was carved from ebony and his expression rarely changed. Only his dark eyes showed any life and they were filled with anger. “My men will support you in any way they can, but our folks are on those boats and we would dearly like to get them back safe, sir,” he said in a controlled voice.

---

“Mr. Jordan. We also have folks on those boats,” answered Karl. “They are our main objective, also. I will do anything, short of letting those murderers go, to get them back. I will make and break any promise. We, at Mitchell, did this to a man a few years back. General March. We could have taken him, though it would have been rough and a lot of our people would have died, so we didn’t. We made a pact with the devil and let him go and told him to stay on the other side of the Missouri/Mississippi line.

---

“A lot more people ended up dying before his little empire fell apart. Ours as well as others. We should have taken care of our own dirty laundry at the time. We have learned our lesson. We will take care of this and let the chips fall where they may.”

---

Jordan sighed and nodded. His two eldest daughters had been taken while he and his sons were out hunting. The reavers had killed his wife and youngest daughter.

---

The meeting broke up. Karl took the 4<sup>th</sup> Tennessee and the 8<sup>th</sup> Kentucky back with him, leaving the Palo Duro rangers, Zach and Leo. He promised to send all of the sharpshooters and their equipment when he got to the main camp.

---

Ishtar Singh led the three contingents which were to carry out Phase 1 of the plan on the north side of the river. He took the 19<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro and 10<sup>th</sup>

Palo Duro Rangers with thirty men making up the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> North Carolina Troops to hit the reavers nearest the coast. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Kentucky and the 6<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Rangers, under Kevin Tollandson, with twenty-five Virginians who had come in with the Reserve column had the responsibility of eliminating the middle column of reavers. The westernmost reavers were to be eliminated by the 12<sup>th</sup> Texas Rangers, the 5<sup>th</sup> Texas Scouts and the 4<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry under Todd Hopkins. For the reavers on the south side of the river, Leo Appleton would use the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Troop, 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers and thirty Virginians.

---

The attacks would be carried out three days after Ishtar left, to give them enough time to make a wide swing around the enemy and get into position. The day for departure was set when the four long-range reaver bands left within a day of each other. There was a flurry of activity and then quiet as the wait began.

---

A close eye was kept on the river boats, but there was no extraordinary activity. On the third day, Zach went over his equipment for the sixth time and inspected the other three sharpshooters' equipment for the third time when he realized that all he was doing was making everyone else jumpy.

---

"Look, Carlos," he said. "I'm going to the main camp and see if there is any news. Got any messages to go back?" He saddled a mount and rode off. Zach did not expect to hear anything until the next day, at least, but he was able to fill in the time going over the plan for Phase II. He tried to sleep that night, but awoke at every sound. Finally, he rose and joined the dozen other men around the fire and drank coffee and smoked his pipe.

---

At mid-morning, Leo and his command rode in. They had several loads of weapons packed on extra horses and eight prisoners. The slaves had been sent to the civilian settlement, except for two Tennessee troopers who had been captured in Georgia.

---

There were also empty saddles and wounded to illustrate the battle had not been one-sided. After the men had been cared for, an officer call went out and Leo reported on the action against the reavers. He started by throwing several items on the table. They included a bulletproof vest and a pair of binoculars.

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"That gives them the advantage, gentlemen. We have never used

bulletproof vests because most ammunition will penetrate them. These are a little different. They come from a company which was developing a super Kevlar honeycomb material to deflect a bullet and guide it around the wearer. I heard about it just before I retired and The Troubles started. I had not thought there were any prototypes, much less production models. I would guess our boys had access to the factory somewhere along their route. We salvaged thirteen of these vests from the reavers.

---

When he finished talking and handed the vest to Tom Kittering from Mississippi, Baxter picked up the binoculars and looked through them. His startled cry brought all attention to him. He stared at Leo.

---

“My reaction, exactly,” the ex-medic said with a grim smile. He took them from Baxter’s hand and held them up for all to see. They were boxier than normal, pointing to a great deal of electronics in the tough, plastic case. “These little gems have infra-red, normal and night vision capabilities, like the sniper scopes and the glasses we have. They are also equipped with sound detection, enhancement and pin-pointing capabilities. When the concept was just a twinkle in some scientist’s eye, the idea was to focus a receptor and concentrate the sound into an earpiece. It would ignore all other sounds outside of the receptor cone. What Baxter got was a vibration of sound without the receptor, which is a little startling.”

---

“That is how the reavers protect themselves from surprise attack, even if their point men are taken out.”

---

Dan Monroe drawled, “Did they catch you with that little thing, then?”

---

“No. When I train my men, silence is of first importance. A lot of things carry sound: water and metal, for example. My men are quiet until the moment of attack. Another advantage is that these things only detect sound from the direction they are pointing. And, when not set to your eye, you have to look at the small warning light that signals a pickup. Fortunately, when the point and rear guard were taken out, the glasses were pointed in another direction or weren’t being watched.”

---

Baxter knocked on the table for attention and said, “Okay, Leo, suppose you tell us what did happen.”

---

“Yeah. Well, we had a couple of the rangers shadow them from a

distance, probably outside the range of the sound detector, fortunately. They relayed where the reavers were headed. When we were pretty sure, I had the rangers split into two groups. One for the guards at each end. The 9<sup>th</sup>, I hid in the trees to one side of the road. The Virginians were kept as reserves to take any that broke through our lines. The rangers did their job and we opened up when the head of the column got to me. Most of them went down, though the vests protected those who were wearing them. When I saw some of the reavers taking a direct hit without dropping, I yelled for headshots. The two Tennessee boys tried to help by knocking over one of the guards and beating the crap out of him.

---

“They got off one volley, that’s where our casualties came from.”

---

“I called for them to surrender and eight did after we killed the rest. We lost three killed and eight wounded, most from flying slivers, only two serious, but they will recover. None of the Virginians was hurt. There were four of the slaves killed during the engagement.” Zach’s heart was in his throat until the dead were identified. Though he was saddened at the deaths, he was glad that the ranger killed had not been David Benton or the Appletons. He looked over at Karl and read the relief on his face.

---

Zach raised his hand and asked, “Leo, why did you bring any prisoners back?”

---

“Look, all I wanted to do was get them to surrender. I’m like you Zach, I was going to hang them as soon as they were disarmed. I even had them tied up and ready to swing, but the guys from Tennessee stopped me. These eight are new recruits. The claim is that they were impressed into service.”

---

“So, why weren’t the Tennessee boys recruited?” countered Zach. “They had experience, training. Something is fishy about all this, even with people to vouch for their moral character,” he finished sarcastically.

---

Baxter appointed a committee to look into the prisoners’ fate and thanked Leo. The meeting was dismissed and Karl, Leo and Zach went in search of a cup of coffee after dispatching a rider to the forward camp to warn them about the sound detectors. The three discussed the situation in light of the new information. The snipers would have to be extra careful not to make any noise and Leo was openly worried that Zach was going to get himself



killed when he tried to sneak into the woods near the boat.

---

Towards nightfall, a messenger came in to report that the other three columns had been destroyed, but the casualties among the Kentucky force had been high. They had been detected and the reavers put up a running fight of it until the Texans had taken them from the rear and wiped them out. Ishtar Singh was bringing in the survivors and the slaves they had managed to rescue. When asked, he said that they had no reaver prisoners.

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The next day, when Ishtar Singh led his men into camp, he was not in a good mood. Another officer call went out and they assembled in the command tent.

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When the meeting was called to order, the massive Sikh slammed a vest on the table. Hands on his hips, he stared around the room.

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“This is what the reavers have,” he stated. “There was little surprise. No. There was no surprise.” He whirled on Robert Jordan. “There was no surprise because your men would not take orders. They were like children. If it was not for my men, the reavers would have gotten away.”

---

He jabbed a large forefinger in Robert’s face. “They were just to sit until we drove the reavers into them, but they could not wait. They had to charge and be heroes. They have that right. But they have no right to cause my children to die needlessly.”

---

Zach moved to his old friend and laid a hand gently on his shoulder. This brought Ishtar Singh back from the edge of his rage and he cast an appreciative look at Zach.

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“It is my apologies, Mr. Jordan. There is sadness in me for the loss. There should also be sadness for your loss. Again, I apologize.” He turned on his heel and left the tent. Robert rose slowly and followed, saying he had to look after his wounded.

---

Everyone heaved a sigh. Leo’s losses had been light, but Ishtar had eight troopers, six rangers and fifteen North Carolinians killed and it looked like another trooper would not survive the night. From Kevin’s and Todd’s faces, their news was no better.

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Todd reported next, “We had the same problem with those damn vests, though no one blew our cover. Somehow they knew we were there, though they didn’t know how many or I don’t think they would have tried to

jump us.

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“When they charged the Tennesseans at the end of the trap, they were held up pretty good. We had them between pretty thick woods and bottled the reavers up. They fought hard and used the slaves as protection, but they couldn’t last long in that space and we got them all, including, unfortunately, the slaves. We heard firing and swung in that direction in time to hit the reavers that Ishtar was chasing.

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“Our losses were eleven killed and twelve wounded. Two of the wounded are questionable.”

---

He moved back and Kevin stood. “I guess we were luckier or the reavers were overconfident, because we hit them and wiped them out in one quick strike. Charlie Randall was our only casualty and he broke his leg on the way back when a bird startled him and he slipped off the road and caught his foot between two rocks.

---

“Can you tell me how they were able to know we were there?”

---

Leo explained about the binoculars and Todd whistled and shook his head.

---

“We found a couple of them things among the bodies. They are with the rest of the equipment,” he said as Kevin nodded.

---

Baxter got them back to business by tapping on the table with his empty coffee mug. They discussed the rest of the timetable. Karl was given overall command with Ishtar Singh and Kevin Tollandson as leaders of the two columns which would each strike at one of the scavenging parties.

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Baxter took command of the second assault team. Leo Appleton would command the troops assigned to the wood-cutting detail, Tom Kittering and Bobby Preston would lead the details attacking the scavenging parties on their side of the river.

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Two sniper teams, led by Zach would keep the reavers manning the boat on the near side busy and the remaining four sniper teams would serve the same function on the far bank.

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As they were finishing up the planning session, a trooper interrupted them with the news that there were several reaver hunting parties headed in their direction. Within minutes, the camp was broken down and made to look

as if it had not been occupied recently. The troopers retreated to the North Carolina settlement.

---

Later that afternoon, Karl led out his column with the understanding that they would attack on the morning of the third day. He would make a wide swing and come at the river from New Bern. His sniper teams would set up before first light and be ready when the assault began.

---

Just after the half moon rose on the night before the attack, Zach and his three men, with Leo's assault team, began to move towards the river. There they split; Zach's snipers and the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers creeping towards the small hill where they would establish a firebase. Leo, whose troopers were all rangers or woodsmen from the Virginia and North Carolina contingents, drifted towards the logging site. Each party was equipped with night vision goggles or binoculars.

---

Zach's men made the small copse that crowned the hill and he had his men camouflaged several hours before the assault was to begin. He gave strict orders that no one was to make any noise that could be detected by the lookout on the boat. He and Daniel held a conference at the base of the Sniper's Hill opposite the river.

---

"Zach, did you notice anything?" asked the ranger.

---

"Yeah. There's a lot of activity on the boat so late at night. I wonder if they suspect something and are setting up a trap. We could get cut off here. We're pretty isolated."

---

Daniel gave him a sideways look. "I could go out there and snoop around."

---

Zach snorted. "Right, and I would have to face your parents when you got all shot up and killed. Not likely."

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"Come on, Zach. If we don't find out what is going on, we all may get shot up and killed. How would Sarah feel about that?"

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"At least I would be dead and be safe from her wrath," the older man muttered.

---

Daniel continued, "If I get caught, I don't think they will want to just kill me. For one thing, they would want to know if I was alone. For another, I would be a recruit. Listen, I would say that I wanted to join them. I had been

watching and snuck on board to prove myself. Something like that.”

---

Zach shook his head. “The minute the shooting started, you’d be dead and you know it.”

---

He could see that Zach was weakening and he pressed on, “Karl trained us well. Both of them did. You can’t protect me, Zach. We need the intel on what is going on. Who else are you going to send? Or are you just going to call it off?”

---

Zach sighed, realizing that he was beaten. Leo had enough confidence in his sons to send them into Louisiana and on independent missions. “All right. You be careful. And, if you do get caught, I will call the assault on this side of the river off until we can figure a way to get you out.”

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## Chapter 10

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### Daniel's Scout

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*Spring/Summer 2052*

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*I just know I am going to regret the decision to let Daniel go. Even though he is right, we do need the intel, I have a sinking feeling in my stomach. We almost had to hog-tie Jason when he found out, but Daniel had a talk with him and he calmed down.*

---

Daniel grinned and began shedding weapons. He would only take his Arkansas toothpick and two throwing knives. With his face smeared with black boot polish they found in town, he made his way down the small gully. He was wearing slipper moccasins and dark clothing. There was only a faint ripple when he entered the water and he began a slow frog kick stroke. His brother was there to see him off and Zach kept an eye on Jason to make sure he did not do something rash.

---

Daniel avoided the light reflected from the cabin windows that danced on the water and swam to the paddle wheel. Treading water, he waited for the sentries to make their rounds. He counted off the seconds until they appeared again and, after the third time, had their routine calculated. The sentry on the second deck took twelve minutes while the sentry on the main deck made his longer round in fifteen minutes.

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He edged towards the hull and climbed into position under the deck level. The lapping of the river hid any faint sounds made by the water dripping from his clothes. The slow, bored footsteps passed. Daniel slowly lifted himself up and rolled under the wrought iron railing. He came to rest against the sandbags piled at the aft end of the ship. The wet mark he left should be hidden from the sentry. With a throwing knife in hand, he waited for the sentry to make his next round. Fortunately, both sentries passed by at around the same time.

---

When it was safe, Daniel silently rose and threw the scrap of burlap he had tied around his head on the deck. He first spring carried him to the dry

burlap and his second to the shadowed area under the upper deck. A quick tug on the cord tied to the corner of the sacking brought it back to his hands. After he had retied the burlap around his head, he tiptoed across the covered portion of the deck bent almost double. He slipped into a passageway and tried the first door he came to. He listened carefully as he eased it open, but did not hear a sound. The porthole curtain was slightly open and he saw that it was a storeroom. When the sentry's shadow passed the window, he slipped out and moved across the passageway to the double doors on the other side. They had glass inserts and he saw that there was nobody in sight, though there was light under one of the doors.

---

He knew that he would be seen if he tried to listen at the porthole. Stealing down the carpeted hall, he tried the door next to the lighted room. It swung under his hand and he slipped in. A snore from the bunk startled him and he leapt silently towards the faintly seen mound on the lower bunk. His knife slit the man's throat and he died with a faint gurgle of sound and a short struggle.

---

Though he had the training, he had never killed a man with a knife before and he felt a little nauseated. He swallowed the bile rising in his throat and took a deep breath.

---

When he was sure that his victim was dead, Daniel carefully reached onto the upper bunk and found it empty. Swiftly he moved back and closed the door. He poured out the inch of liquor from the glass on the bedside and pressed the opening against the wall and put his ear to the other end.

---

It worked in the old films, but Daniel was barely able to hear anything. After a few minutes of straining to decipher the words from the other room, he heard the sound of scraping chairs. Apparently, the meeting was over and he had not been able to determine what was being said. He crossed to the door, hoping to hear something through the thinner barrier as the participants left.

---

A rattle of the doorknob warned him that the room's other occupant was returning. Daniel positioned himself behind the door just as it swung open. The man entering the room was speaking over his shoulder. "...get done. Tell Captain Lafitte not to worry. We'll be ready to cross the river before noon. There are only a dozen or so cords to load." The words were

polite, but sounded a little derisive.

---

As he stepped into the room he muttered, "Why they had to wake me up at this time of night just to tell me that, I don't know. The Old Man sure gets some crazy ideas."

---

As the newcomer closed the door, Daniel put a hand over the other's mouth and slid the knife between his ribs into his heart and the man went limp immediately. Easing the sagging body to the floor, Daniel took a deep breath. He knew that if he was caught with two dead men, the rest of the reavers would never believe his story about wanting to join them.

---

He lifted the dead weight of the corpse and managed to roll him onto the top bunk. Pulling a blanket from under the dead man, he covered him. When he turned to the door he saw a dark patch on the floor and realized it was a small pool of blood. He moved a rug over the spot and listened at the door.

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When there was no sound, he slipped into the hall and out the double doors. As he exited, a rough hand clamped on his shoulder and spun him around.

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It was the sentry. In his hurry to get away, he had acted like a raw recruit and been caught. Luckily, in the darkened passageway the sentry had not noticed the Arkansas Toothpick suspended under his left armpit. With adrenaline still pumping, Daniel continued to turn and slammed his rigid fingers into the man's throat, crushing his larynx. With a strangled cry, the sentry grabbed his throat and fell to his knees. Daniel managed to catch his rifle before it clattered to the deck. He brought the barrel down on the man's head with a sickening thud.

---

Daniel knew he had little time to lose. He opened the door to the storage room and shoved the corpse in. Swiftly going through its pockets, he took spare clips and a folding knife, which could be used by an escapee. He listened for the other sentry to pass. Daniel carried the rifle and other articles to the railing by the sandbags, leaned over and laid them on the framework of the paddle wheel. As he was about to slide under the railing, he hesitated.

---

There was a machine gun in the middle of the sandbags which had a clear line of fire at the hill where the snipers were hiding. Hurriedly, he grabbed a clip of ammunition and began slipping shells down the barrel. He hoped that the

obstruction would cause the gun to jam when it was fired.

---

He finally eased under the rail and slipped into the water. He slid the rifle and spare magazines under the transom to be picked up later. There was a faint lightening of the eastern sky when he pulled himself onto the small beach where the gulley met the river. Eager hands grabbed him and almost lifted him from the water. He waved them off and leaned over to throw up. The strain and killings had caught up to him. After a minute he wiped his mouth and accepted a drink of water from a canteen someone handed him.

---

They hurried him up to where Zach was hastily scrambling down the hill. Jason threw a coat around his shoulders. Taking a deep breath, Daniel quickly related the events of the evening. By the time he was finished, the eastern horizon was blazing with morning colors.

---

Zach climbed back to his position and settled in with Jimmy as his spotter. The slaves had been roused and the logging party was winding its way towards the cutting ground. The rest were being pushed into line to finish loading the cut bunks.

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A few minutes later, there was a disturbance on the aft deck. The machinegun nests were hastily manned and reavers were lining the railing, looking towards the still dark woods. A puff of smoke rose from the stacks as the boilers were lit.

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“They found the dead men,” Zach thought, then said, “Get ready, George. You take the upper deck and I’ll take the lower. Observer first, then the machine gunners, as soon as somebody starts the ball rolling.”

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The Rangers assigned to protect the snipers began drifting down the hill through the trees to better vantage points. They took cover behind a few downed trees to defend against an assault, should the reavers initiate one.

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# Chapter 11

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## The Showdown

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*Spring/Summer 2052*

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*A little nerve wracking. Leo's going to rant and I can't blame him. At least that part turned out okay. My big worry is that this will upset our plans. We have to be ready if there is some alarm sounded and they recall the woodcutting party.*

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There was a burst of sound across the river. Karl had started his assault. Zach took a deep breath and squeezed the trigger. Pieces of binocular sprayed as the bullet drove through and into the observer on the upper deck. As the man fell, Zach lowered his sights and found the machine gunners. They were both looking at the crumpled body of the man just killed. A shot finished the feeder and another spun the trigger man away from his weapon. As he struggled to rise, Zach finished him.

---

They heard an explosion from the ship and a quick glance showed the aft machinegun a piece of twisted wreckage and the two gunners tumbled on the deck. Daniel's plan had worked beyond expectations. The ammunition in the barrel had exploded and wrecked the gun.

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The slaves had dropped to the ground or run for the woods. The reavers, having nothing else at which to shoot, began firing at the panicked figures, cutting them down. The rangers returned fire and dropped the reavers at the railing.

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Zach swung his rifle to a target Jimmy identified. A reaver was running towards the machinegun. As he pulled the cocking lever, Zach put a bullet through his throat. Another man was firing from the wheelhouse and a shot from George left him slumped over the window sill.

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After switching magazines, Zach began picking off reavers along the railing. He told Jimmy to keep an eye on the machinegun nest and warn him if there were any more attempts to man it.

---

Eventually, someone pointed to the hill and fire was concentrated

there. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, Zach took out anyone with binoculars or sighted weapons. After several minutes, a white flag appeared. The decks were littered with bodies. The machineguns at the forward nests had not been able to bear on the hill and the one attempt to move one had resulted in five dead gunners.

---

Zach yelled out, "Come out with your hands up. Put your weapons on the deck, go down the gangplank and kneel on the ground with your ankles crossed and your hands behind your heads."

---

A voice from the boat called back, "Just let us go. We promise to sail out of here and never return. Okay?"

---

Zach put in a fresh clip and, after warning the rest of his party not to fire, proceeded to riddle the walls of the cabins. When he was finished, he yelled, "Those walls are pretty thin. When the rest of the boys get here, what you want to bet we can't make matchsticks out of the whole thing?"

---

A few minutes later the first reaver tentatively stepped out of the passageway. He laid his weapons on the deck and followed instructions. One after the other, the rest followed until there were twelve men and women kneeling on the ground.

---

Zach called out to them, "You on the slope. You know that the minute anyone fires from the boat, you are all going to die."

---

There was an expletive from the first one that surrendered. "There's two more that won't quit. You can't blame us for that. Come on!"

---

Turning his attention to the boat, Zach yelled, "Come out now or we set fire to the thing. You've got nowhere to run. You can't get steam up and we have plenty of time."

---

"We got people of yours in here. We'll kill them unless you let us go," someone from the boat returned.

---

"Nice try, but they aren't ours. Go ahead and kill them. You don't get away, believe that," Zach replied. "Just what do you think is going to happen when all your hostages are gone?"

---

Another few minutes passed and the slaves started to walk down the gangplank. The last figures off were the two reavers who deposited their weapons and sullenly joined their fellows.

---

Zach told Daniel to send a party to check out the boat and post guards over the prisoners. When one of the slaves started for the pile of weapons, Zach put a shot in front of him. He warned them that he would shoot to kill the next time anyone made a move to arm themselves. There were three casualties, Robert Hogg, Carlos Aldo and Corey Wilkes had been killed during the firefight.

---

By the time the paddle-wheeler had been cleared and the prisoners secured, Leo and his rangers appeared around the hill from the logging site. He had most of the former slaves in tow. When he was close enough to identify his sons, his face broke into a wide grin and he showed a “thumbs up” sign.

---

There was desultory firing in the direction of the coast, but the opposite side of the river was dead quiet. When he looked from the upper deck, Zach saw several columns of smoke. A few bodies were sprawled on the decks, but there was no movement on the boats.

---

Leo dispersed his men to set up a picket line around the immediate area and sent the 1<sup>st</sup> Arkansas Rangers to determine the situation with the other two ambush parties.

---

“Two minor wounds,” he said as he joined Zach. “We had them dead to rights and all but one surrendered. He sprayed a clip into the trees and hit a couple of the Kentucky boys. Nothing serious. How about you?”

---

Zach replied, still looking through the binoculars, “Not much trouble. They never had to face a disciplined force and they had no clue. Got a few captives. What did you do with yours?”

---

Leo took the glasses and focused them across the river. “There was a lot of rope in the logging camp. We didn’t let it go to waste. In case it comes up, none of the prisoners spoke up for any of them.”

---

As Zach was trying to think of how to break the news of Daniel’s foray, a sound from the bank took them to the opposite railing. Coming around Sniper’s Hill were the rest of the other troopers and the ex-slaves. There were no prisoners.

---

“Looks like Baxter’s boys made out okay, huh?” Zach observed. “Look, Leo. Daniel made, well, a little recon run. We really...”

---

Zach noticed that his friend was trying, unsuccessfully to keep a straight face.

“You know, then,” he said in disgust.

---

“Yeah, Daniel told me. I just wanted to see how you were going to break it to me. I haven’t seen you sweat like that since you had to explain to Sarah about leaving last that time. You’ve got to work on your delivery.”

---

“If I had know what a bastard you would turn out to be, I wouldn’t have let them take out that lumber out of you in Louisiana,” he returned in mock disgust.

---

They both laughed and started down the stairs to exchange notes with Baxter, Tom and Bobby. When they reached the first deck, they witnessed a reunion between Robert Jordan and a young woman from the freed slaves’ camp.

---

“That makes it worthwhile, anyway,” said Baxter as Zach and Leo joined him, Bobby and Tom. The expedition leader turned and asked, “How did it go here? I see you have some prisoners.”

---

“They are all mine, Bax. Leo took care of his loose ends up at the logging camp.”

---

“Well, we did too, though Bobby didn’t have too many to dispose of. Many casualties?”

---

“I had three dead. Leo was clean, just a couple of minor wounds. How about you?”

---

“Tom had his men surround the camp and when they started stirring, he just stepped out and corralled them all. It was a complete surprise and not a shot was fired. Bobby had some trouble. Tell them, Bobby.”

---

The young Louisianan cleared his throat. “We didn’t get in position as early as we wanted and missed trapping them in camp. We had to hit them as they were spreading out in some small town and ended up in a firefight. Lost eight and nineteen wounded. Chased them out of town, finally and the boys from North Carolina got the rest. Some of the slaves grabbed weapons and got into the act.”

---

Tom observed, “It’s like you’ve always said, Zach. These boys ain’t never come up against anybody anywheres organized and they just couldn’t handle it. Some of ‘em even cried when we had ‘em ready to hang and promised to be good from now on.

---

‘Anyways, we brought back all of the supplies and weapons we found. What’s

happening on t'other side of the river?"

---

Leo glanced over his shoulder at the far bank. "Nothing that we can see. Come on upstairs and look for yourself." He led them up the stairs after Baxter told a runner to have breakfast started. He sent another runner to tell Robert Jordan to have the ex-slaves armed and to join them on the upper deck.

---

They were looking towards the three boats tied up at the far docks. The one farthest upriver had started to list slightly showing that some of the damage was below the water line. The middle boat, which had a black flag with a white hourglass, showed smoke from its stacks. Smaller boats were moving from the downstream ship to the middle one, carrying supplies and people.

---

Leo asked, "Baxter, do you want us to stop the rowboats? The machineguns we have on board would do the trick."

---

He thought a moment, and then replied, "If we start shooting, we take a chance on hitting our own men on the far bank, no matter how careful you are, Leo. I'm more worried about them getting up steam and taking off."

---

Zach interjected, "Let's send the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers down to the overpass with a few hand grenades. They can drop them into the stacks when the boats pass. We never did get the log boom in place. Anyway, that would probably put an end to our pirate friend."

---

Baxter nodded and another runner was sent to inform Daniel. As the trooper left, Robert Jordan joined them. They greeted him and asked how his daughter was doing. After the pleasantries had been exchanged, Baxter brought him up to speed on their plans at the bridge. Conversation trailed off when it was obvious that there was something on the man's mind.

---

When Leo told him to spit it out, Robert said, "It's the prisoners. I know what evil they have done, but just hanging them without a trial. That goes against the grain."

---

Zach snorted and said, "Robert, you obviously haven't had the run-ins we have had with these animals. When they decided that they had the right to steal, rape, enslave and murder, they put themselves outside the law. I don't have any more compunction about shooting them than I have killing a rabid animal.

---

"Hell, man, your own daughter was taken. Ask her."

---

Baxter held up a hand to stop the flow of words. “Mr. Jordan. Between the Mahdists, reavers and Aztecs, we have had our share of troubles. Maybe we could, with time and care, rehabilitate these people. We just don’t have the prisons, social welfare programs, mind-doctors and all to do it. We don’t like killing anymore than you do, but we decided a long time ago that when we caught someone doing wrong and they were not citizens, we administered summary justice then and there.

---

“We don’t look upon it as punishment. You only punish to teach a lesson. Not much you can learn if you are dead. The way we see it; we are cutting out a cancer from the body politic. You don’t try to negotiate with cancer or rehabilitate or befriend it. You get rid of it, if you can.

---

“That doesn’t mean we kill anyone we find wandering around. Not even those who are looting, unless they are stealing from someone standing right there. But, anyone caught with reavers like these or participating in rape, enslavement, murder or other crimes against someone, they are guilty by their own actions.

---

“This may seem a little rough and it is. Our own citizens have the full trappings of the Constitution. As we explained, the guilty are banished or executed. We don’t have long-term prisoners or slaves. You either get along or get gone.”

---

Robert shook his head and said, “I can understand your feelings, but it is so easy to descend into legal lynching and murder.”

---

Leo put his arm around the other man’s shoulders. “I sympathize with you, Bob. You must have had some of these gangs go through here in the last ten years or so. How did you handle it?”

---

Robert said ruefully, “Not by banding together, that’s for sure. We had lookouts spotted around. When we saw a gang coming, we took everything we could and hid out. We just made sure there was something left for them to take. They usually left us alone for a while, until the next harvest, when they would come again.”

---

Zack said sarcastically, “Then your brand of reavers were a lot more generous than ours.”

---

Tom called their attention to the far bank. They saw some activity on the center boat. Several men ran to the ropes that fastened the ship to the docks

and attempted to untie them. Shots rang out from the nearby buildings and the figures crumpled. They heard the sound of voices, but not the words. A burst of machinegun fire from the bank terminated the shouting.

---

Water churned as the paddle wheel turned, straining to break the ropes with the power of the engines. A screech of metal and the immediate halt of the wheel gave evidence that there was a catastrophic failure on the ship.

---

“Drive shaft,” commented Robert. “The only thing that will move that thing is oars, now.” He turned to Zach and asked, “Why don’t they shoot at us?”

---

Zach mulled it over for a minute and replied, “First, I don’t think they have any machineguns where they are hiding. If they don’t, then shooting at us with rifles would just encourage us to use our machineguns on them. You can see from the Texas that there is very little protection from these walls. Second, why pick a fight with us when they have the Karl and the rest to contend with.”

---

Still looking through his glasses, Baxter said, “Just like I thought. They want to parlay. Now that they can’t move, they know what sitting ducks they are.”

---

On the center boat a white piece of cloth was being waved from the upper deck. They heard the sound of voices from the other bank, though not the words. Several minutes later the reavers began filing out and stacking their weapons. Troopers began moving from the buildings and organizing the prisoners. Several men searched the boats.

---

When they were finished, a figure stood on the upper deck of the central ship and waved his arms over his head, beckoning them. Leo waved back and turned to the shore side of the boat. He asked for volunteers to get the boilers stoked and steam up so they could join the others.

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Swift action followed the request. The reavers were led to the bow and secured. A black gang headed for the boiler room and one of the released slaves offered to pilot, since the reaver pilots had been killed during the firefight.

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A half-hour later, a blast of the whistle signaled the lines to be released and they got underway. A short trip across the water brought them to the far piers where the pilot proved he had a lot to learn when he waited too long to reverse engines and came in too fast. The damage was minimal, however, and there were no injuries except to the pilot’s pride.

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There were thirty-seven prisoners that Karl had corralled in an open area. Baxter ordered the reavers captured across the river to be secured with them.

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He issued an officers call to the main cabin of his boat. Ishtar Singh was brought in on a stretcher. He had been wounded in his left leg and side during the assault when a shoulder mounted rocket exploded in the warehouse where he and his men had taken up firing positions.

---

Kevin Tollandson had been killed when his column had jumped the reaver party scavenging farthest north. The reaver leader had sprayed the Kentuckians with automatic rifle fire before he had been cut down.

---

Each of the commanders reported on their losses. Ishtar Singh listed four of the Virginians and two troopers from the 19<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro as killed. Six others had been wounded. Kevin Tollanson's replacement, Samuel Vilovic, a laconic man, reported six men had been killed with Kevin from the Kentucky contingent. Tom Kittering had no casualties, as he had surrounded his scavenging group as they were preparing breakfast. Bobby Preston had the greatest losses with twelve men killed in a running fight. When the reavers had reached the dockside buildings, the Louisiana team had to fight house-to-house before they were able to eliminate the opposing fighters.

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Baxter reported on the action which had taken place on the far bank against the scavenger party, Leo detailed the action against the logging party and Zach sketched the fight at the boat.

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When the Zach was finished, Baxter thanked the leaders and asked them to express his admiration to their men. He asked for a moment of silence for the dead and expressed his sympathy to their commanders.

---

Leo turned to Karl and asked, "What about this LaFitte fellow? Is he one of the prisoners?"

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The rest of the officers sounded their curiosity and Karl answered, "No. Our master pirate is down with Davey Jones. He, or one of his men, put a pistol to his head and blew his brains out. Nobody is admitting anything and I don't think we will ever find out what really happened."

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"Final order of immediate business is what to do with the reavers," Baxter said while that bit of news was absorbed.

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Ishtar boomed, "What else but hang them."

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“You can’t just hang them without a trial,” Robert Jordan protested.

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Ishtar snorted in disgust and answered, “Very good, let’s try them and then hang them.”

---

Several of the others commented on the waste of time, but Zach held up a hand and said, “I understand the feelings here. We have always summarily executed any reavers we found. However, Mr. Jordan may be right; we have grown out of the ‘frontier justice’ days. If anyone has jurisdiction in North Carolina, it’s Robert and his people. And, if they want a trial, then we should bow to their request.”

---

Baxter understood Zach’s train of thought. Now that they were getting organized as a country and wanted to include as much of the prior territory as possible, they had to play the political games that were required, though he was a little surprised that it was Zach who wanted to play it. Short of conquest, which would leave a bad taste in their mouths, the North Carolinians were free to pursue their own destiny.

---

“Zach has a point. Robert, will you return to your people and poll them on what they want done with the prisoners? We will await your decision in the morning.”

---

Robert thanked them and left to gather the other North Carolinians and meet with the families left in camp. He promised that he would have an answer for them in the morning.

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The war council organized work parties to talk with the released slaves and determine their plans for the future; to repair the damage to the boats; gather the weapons and supplies; bury the dead and tend the wounded.

---

As the meeting broke up, Karl, Leo and Zach sat down by Ishtar Singh’s pallet. “Friend Zach,” he said in his thunderous voice, “now we are twins. We both have limbs damaged by evildoers. My little Siri will weep and comfort me with delicacies made with her own hands. She will fluff my pillows and sing sweetly while wiping my fevered brow with scented water. My children will gather around and I will tell them lies about the fierceness of my struggle against overwhelming odds. My audience will gasp at the dangers I survived.”

---

Karl snorted. “You old fraud. I’ll make sure they know the truth; that you fell off your horse because you are too old to ride and should be put in a

rocking chair with a blanket around your shoulders by the fire.”

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“You wound me again, friend Karl,” he replied, feigning sadness. “To lie about the glorious struggle against hundreds of ferocious pirates. Alas, I have no friends left.”

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After more ribbing, the corpsman shooed them out, saying his patient  
had to have

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his dressings changed and to get some rest.

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## Chapter 12

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### Aftermath

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*Summer 2052*

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*When we got together again, we discussed the ease with which we seem to be able to eliminate even the large reaver bands, a common discussion point that never seems to wane. For that matter, the Mahdists, too. Karl and Leo both agreed that there were two elements to our success. First, the enemy had not had any real opposition. I had come to that conclusion years ago. Against small communities and isolated families, an overwhelming force was bound to win. And, lately, the reavers we had met, except for the pirates, had begun to live like feudal lords, protecting the ‘serfs’ and ‘peasants’ in exchange for supplies.*

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*Lafitte and his bunch represented the older ways of rape and pillage. Even they had taken off when they encountered stiff opposition.*

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*The second point they made was a little more subtle. The reavers, except for General March and Louisiana, had only temporary camps from which they raided. From our first encounter with a larger band in Rawlings to these latest ‘pirate’ reavers, they were nomadic. They stayed in one place until the resources were exhausted and moved on. When they were pinned down, they charged like maniacs, left or disintegrated into small bunches that happened to be together. Very few of them fought to the death. They surrendered when trapped or scattered to the wind when able. As Leo pointed out, they have nothing to fight for.*

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*We have homes. A sense of cohesiveness, of family, of community. We don’t live a nomadic life. More than that, we know we have to win or lose our way of life. Sure, we could pick up and move, but that’s not who we are. I think Ishtar put it best when he said that there are three parts to our success: one, we have a clear picture of the future; two, we have the training and leaders to defend ourselves and others; three, we know how to make friends.*

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*I think it is because we attack when faced with our enemies. Even when the Mahdists sent an expedition to attack us in the early years, we had several*

*troops disrupting their artillery and camp. When we found reavers, we jumped them. Same with the Aztecs, the Louisiana reavers, the Mahdists along the Mississippi and all the other times we encountered an enemy. And we always seemed to find allies and make friends. We got the reputation that we were best left alone or treated with.*

---

*Boy, I have got to stop having a few drinks before I write this. I start getting maudlin and philosophical. Probably, I will tear this out tomorrow.*

---

The next morning Zach woke with a headache and a bad taste in his mouth. Luckily there was coffee in the galley and he was able to chase away the cobwebs by the time Robert Jordan and his party returned.

---

Baxter called for a meeting and they gave Robert the floor. The man looked exhausted and Zach suspected that he had spent a long night of it, convincing his people to his way of thinking.

---

Jordan started out by thanking the commanders of the United States forces for their help in fighting the reavers and expressed his state's sympathies with their losses. When these preliminaries were finished, he continued with what sounded like a prepared statement.

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"Gentlemen, after intense discussion and deep reflection, the citizens of the sovereign state of North Carolina desire to follow a procedure where the prisoners are allowed to face their accusers to determine their guilt and subsequent punishment. We are all opposed to summary executions. We do not want to make an enemy of the reconstituted United States, but are prepared to hold ourselves apart if our requests are ignored."

---

Zach mentally shook his head. There it was. The threat to remain independent if this trial did not go through. He agreed that the reavers were guilty and they should hang, but, on the other hand, if they wanted to rebuild as much as possible of the old United States, they would have to tread lightly.

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Baxter thanked Robert and asked, "What are the procedures you wish to follow for these trials? You have a judicial system? Lawyers?"

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Jordan looked embarrassed and replied, "Mr. Ashe, we thought that each prisoner would face the court or jury and plead. Then, if they pled not guilty, we would have testimony for or against them. Truth to tell, we aren't lawyers and we ask your help in these matters."

---

Baxter leaned back in his seat for a moment. He looked around at his officers. “The men at the table and you, Mr. Jordan would form the jury. Mr. Banducci is the Justice of the Peace for Mitchell and I would recommend him as the judge. Attorneys would have to be picked to represent the defendants and the State of North Carolina. Time needs to be set aside to prepare the case for both sides, say a week. How does that strike you?”

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“I would agree to Zach as the judge, since he has experience, and the time frame, but since this is a matter for the state, I think that the jury should be made up of North Carolinians. I would accept the defense of the prisoners since there are no lawyers among us.”

---

Baxter looked at Zach and arched a brow as if to ask his advice.

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The Mitchell J.P. sighed and said, “Okay. Baxter, you are appointed the prosecutor. Robert, give me a list of potential jurors and I will randomly select a panel. There will be no challenges and the jurors I pick will be the final panel. We will start tomorrow with the charges, which will be, what, murder, rape, kidnapping, theft and slavery. Those who declare their innocence will have a hearing starting two days later and continuing until the proceedings are complete.

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“The jury will rule on each defendant before we move on to the next one. With a jury of twelve, it will require ten to convict, since these are capital cases. A guilty verdict will elicit the death penalty; otherwise, they will be released with a rifle, supplies and a mount and banished from the United States and North Carolina. Does that suit you, Robert?”

---

Jordan conferred with his party for a few minutes. He turned and answered Zach, “We are uncomfortable with the death penalty or banishment being the only options. Is there a way to incarcerate them for a period of time, to rehabilitate them, you know?”

---

Zach tried to hide his exasperation. “Robert. I appreciate you intentions. And if you want to feed and clothe a bunch of reavers, be my guest. Think about what it means. Guards, resources to keep them alive, the chance of escape or riot. There are women as well as men, and some of them are a lot meaner. That requires a separate facility if you don’t want problems with pregnancies and the whole male/female dynamic.”

---

Another conference and the North Carolinians agreed to abide by

Zach's original proposal. They would provide a list of potential jurors in the morning and Zach set 10 a.m. as the time court to convene.

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When the meeting broke up, Bobby Preston, Tom Kittering, Todd Hopkins and Dan Monroe requested permission to leave and return home. As Bobby put it, "We pretty much done here. We found the lost boys, whupped the reavers and it's time to put our feet under our own supper tables. We got crops to tend and kids to raise and it be high time to get on with it."

---

Baxter nodded and thanked them for their assistance. He asked them if they wanted anything from the reaver boats and each took a machinegun and several boxes of ammunition as well as supplies. Zach suggested they stay until the next morning and start out fresh, but Tom said that the road was long enough without delaying the whole thing for another day. He said he would look into the settlements in Georgia and Alabama to see if there was anything they needed and send a message on to Gunnison, if necessary.

---

Within the hour they had packed, said their good-byes and left heading south. Seeing them go, the Virginians opted to leave, also. They agreed to try and organize a state government and would like to have someone from Gunnison visit and hold preliminary meetings regarding joining the U.S. Alvin Caine took a dozen M-34 rifles and three cases of ammunition, two radios and mounts. Zach asked him to send a radio message to the chain of stations and tell them that the rest of the expedition were swinging north and would return through Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio. After agreeing, Alvin and his men thundered out with a cacophony of hollering and war-whoops.

---

The rest of the contingents decided to stay and, at least, see the trial through. Zach said he wanted to explore north through eastern Virginia and up towards Pennsylvania. He planned a big circle to see how far east the Mahdists had spread. His plan was to find groups to form a fence around the Caliphate and contain them in Iowa, Indiana and Illinois, if possible. He felt sure their days were numbered and that they would crumble from within, especially if their ability to impress recruits was severely curtailed. Secretly, he wanted to take a look at the area around Baltimore. That was where he last had any word about his first family.

---

Baxter and the rest of the expedition leaders agreed with him and said they would set out as soon as the trials were over. They were all of a mind that

the whole thing was a farce and that they should have hung the reavers and been done with it.

---

The next morning in a large warehouse, a table had been set up with a chair for Zach and a secretary appointed by Robert Jordan. A podium had been found and the prisoners were brought in one at a time to plead. Several were weeping, some begged, but most were defiant and asserted that they were not subject to the jurisdiction of the court or expressed their opinion of the court with expletives.

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As each one was brought forward, the secretary read the charges and the defendant was asked to plead. Most pled “Not guilty”, though several admitted to the crimes and threw themselves on the mercy of the court. Any who refused to plead was declared as entering a “Not Guilty”. The pleadings for the fifty-one prisoners took several hours. Forty-two had pled not guilty and their trials were scheduled to be held in two days. The other nine were imprisoned in a secure building and members of the North Carolina militia were assigned as guards.

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Meanwhile, Karl had continued to organize several troops from among the local population and those ex-slaves who expressed an interest in remaining in the area. Others had joined the troops heading through Georgia. Most were from that region and would stay in Toccoa. Before they left, Zach performed several wedding ceremonies. The freed slaves were each given a weapon, supplies and mounts or wagons, plus a share of the loot on the boats.

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A group claimed one of the boats as their share. They planned on refurbishing it and using it to establish a trade and passenger route on the river between settlements. The rest chose to stay with one of the United States’ troops and were incorporated as replacements for the casualties they had suffered.

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The trial was held in the same building as the arraignments. Two tables were brought in for the representatives of the state and defense. Twelve chairs were grouped for the jury. The prisoners’ names had been posted and a call for witnesses for and against had been issued. During the ensuing two days, names of the repatriated slaves who wanted to testify at the trial were taken. Before any ex-slaves left, they were given a chance to enter written testimony that was read during the appropriate trial.

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Zach picked the jury at random and they were sworn in by John Ling, head of the Kansans, who was appointed as bailiff. He outlined the trial procedures and they were seated in the jury area.

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The first trial was for one of the crew captains. He was a large man with tattoos covering his arms and chest. Zach was forced to have him gagged him when he constantly interrupted the proceedings. The witnesses were brought in and a litany of his crimes was recited. There was no one who testified in favor of the man. The jury deliberated for seven minutes and returned a unanimous guilty verdict and a request for the death penalty.

---

This was the pattern for the rest of the day. Several of the prisoners had supporters and were banished or declared innocent and allowed to remain, if they wanted. Most of those declared innocent were the eight prisoners captured when the long-range scavenging parties were eliminated.

---

By the end of the week the trials were finished. The condemned prisoners were taken to the bridge and hung. The next morning, the bodies were cut down and allowed to float down the river to the sea. Those under penalty of banishment were given the promised supplies and ordered out of the district. This forced them to travel north along the coast since all territory to the south and west was under the protection of the United States.

---

The North Carolinians moved into Camp Lejeune and began sending out parties to organize any other communities into a cohesive state. Robert Jordan was elected interim president with elections to be held in November for the legislature.

---

Baxter sent a report to Gunnison detailing the course of events. He included a formal request for any assistance they could provide in getting the Interim North Carolina government organized. He asked for volunteers to help train the North Carolina troops and appointed them as advisors for six months, after which they would be relieved.

---

When it came to the division of the reaver loot, the North Carolinians were given the bulk of the armaments and the boats, except for the one already claimed. Baxter and the United States troops took what supplies they needed. The usable items such as clothing, household good, food and tools were sent to the Camp Commissary. The rest of the loot was distributed by leaving it out on the ground by the docks for anyone to take.

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On a bright, sunny late summer morning, the United States troops left and headed north to Kingston and Goldboro to catch I-795. Whenever they found enclaves, they stopped and spread the news of the rebuilding of the United States and the North Carolina government at Camp LeJeune. In several places they stayed for a few days to help the locals with reaver problems, rebuilding or to aid communities stricken by the plague.

---

When they had set out, Ishtar Singh had insisted on riding saying that he was not going to be carried like a 'poor little infant needing care'. The first evening, Leo and several medics had to threaten to hog-tie him unless he agreed to be confined to a wagon. His wounds had opened and he had lost a considerable amount of blood during the day.

---

Zach came to see his old friend and said, "Siri will have something to say about this, I bet. You will be lucky if she lets you in the house, old son. I mean, if you want to commit suicide, I would be happy to loan you my gun. It would be faster and we wouldn't have to feed your worthless carcass while you died." They exchanged some more banter before Zach was ejected from the tent. From then on, Ishtar rode in a wagon until he recovered. Leo expressed his concern about the Sikh and they took it easy for a couple of weeks until he had regained some of his strength.

---

The summer was ending by the time they arrived at Petersburg and they decided to halt for a week to refurbish the wagons and resupply. By this time, Ishtar Singh had recovered enough to ride, though someone had to keep him as quiet as possible so he did not relapse.

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The third night there was a hail from the darkness. "Hello, the fire. Got something extra to munch on?"

---

The troopers faded away from the fires and picked up weapons. The sentry brought in a dozen men and Daniel called out, "Alvin. Alvin Caine. What are you doing here?"

---

The camp returned to normal and the Virginians were escorted to the command tent. They took proffered plates and settled on camp chairs to eat. When they were finished and thanked their hosts, Baxter asked, "I imagine you have a story. Want to tell it?"

---

"Certainly, certainly," answered Alvin. "After you left, Gus couldn't stop thinking about all the poor benighted souls living at the outskirts of

civilization and sent a couple of bunches out in a big sweep through the lowlands. I no more than got back and settled then that fat old liar told me to organize the sweep to the coast.

---

“That Gus couldn’t stand the thought of someone else organizing things and having the political clout so he sent us out to find settlements and lay claim that he was the leader of the Sovereign State of Virginia. He wanted us to force those we found to move to the valley, but we kind of agreed that that was not the way things should be done and we have just been talking to folks. Kind of planting the seed, so to speak.

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“There are a few who wanted to join so we told them to send representatives and talk with Gus. We also warned them not to take him too seriously since we really hadn’t done any electing yet and were waiting for your folks from Gunnison to get there.”

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## Chapter 13

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### Encounter and Puzzle

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*Fall 2052*

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*We are getting close to the north shore of the Chesapeake. I know that it is a foolish hope, but I can't stop thinking about Mary and Beth. The last I heard of them was that they were in the Baltimore refugee camp. Not that I found them there. I know that they are gone, but I still wonder. I guess the big question is: Should I take a trip there or not. Now that there aren't any guards or bureaucrats, I may find some information in records that were left behind. They weren't too helpful last time. My mind says "No", but I am this close.*

---

The expedition headed North when they broke camp. They used SR 631 and US258 to circle Richmond. Their destination was the Manassas Battlefield Park. Any closer and they would be in the hot zone around Washington, D.C. Alvin and his rangers headed toward the ocean to explore around Norfolk and Newport News, though the shipyards would have been hit with something.

---

Zach became silent and moody the closer they got to I-70. At Frederick, he announced that he was going to take a detour and would catch up with them in a few weeks. When Leo pressed him, he just said that there was something he had to do to the east. One morning he was gone. The sentry reported that he had left with a packhorse at around midnight.

---

Leo wanted to send out a troop of rangers and bring him back, but cooler heads prevailed. Ishtar Singh said it all when he announced, "Zach has a need that only he can resolve. It is not for us to lead him around like a puppy. He must put his own ghosts to rest."

---

Regardless, Leo spoke with Daniel and Jason and the two left shortly on Zach's trail. Later he told Karl that they had gone on a long, detached scout. Everyone knew the truth, but pretended to accept the official story.

---

Their orders were to shadow Zach, but not to make contact unless necessary. They took a dozen message stones, their weapons and full packs. Since Zach was not concerned with hiding his trail, they had no problem

following it. Throughout the day, they moved along the left of the interstate.

---

Zach set a fast pace which the brothers were hard pressed to match. When he stopped to make camp that night, the two rangers sank down with relief. Jason lay on his back on a hillside above the unsuspecting camp and panted, "We are going to have to catch some horses if we want to keep up without dying."

---

The next morning, Zach made a hasty breakfast and set out early. He kept up a fast pace between rest stops for the horses. The boys were a mile behind him, having just crested a hill, when they saw him stop. He sat his mount, crooked his leg around the saddlehorn and lit his pipe.

---

"What's he doing?" wondered Daniel.

---

"I don't know, but I'm sure glad he's doing it. We are going to lose him at this rate. Let me catch my breath and then move in."

---

Down on the road, Zach was thinking. If asked for the truth, he could not honestly say he retained a clear picture of his first wife or daughter. Over the years, they had faded from his memory. He finished his pipe and idly knocked out the dottle, cleaned it and packed it again. After he had it lit, he dismounted and led his horses to a patch of grass at the side of the road. Automatically, he picketed them and sat against a tree, thinking. He went over in his mind the last ten years. From the time he had decided on finding a new home in the Rocky Mountains, the meeting with the Smiths, the rescue of the Janissaries and their families, Mitchell, expansion, battles, friends and enemies. His thoughts finally drifted to Sarah and the children.

---

With a snort of disgust, he stood up so suddenly he startled the horses. He quickly pulled the picket pins and swung aboard his riding horse. With a farewell glance to the East, he swung back onto the road, heading West. He had a great family, a loving wife, friends and a home. What was he doing riding after memories. He felt better now that the decision to choose his new life had been made and a smile of anticipation spread across his face.

---

It froze almost immediately. Standing in front of him were four armed men. They had on the same military green uniforms that General March's men wore. One had three hash marks on his sleeve. At a sound behind him, Zach slowly twisted in the saddle and saw three more men.

---

Carefully folding his hands over the pommel of his saddle, he said,

“Hello, gentlemen. What can I do for you?”

---

The sergeant answered, “Who are you and what are you doing around here?”

---

“Just passing through. In fact, I’m turning around and heading back to where I came from.” As he finished, he gave a light thump on his horse’s ribs.

---

One of the other men grabbed his reins as the sergeant said, “Hold it right there, buddy. Captain Armstrong will want to talk to you.”

---

Zach knew he was fairly caught and his captors lead him off in his original direction. At the next exit, a guard post had been built and was manned by five more enlisted men and an officer fanning himself with his campaign hat.

---

He looked up and in a bored voice asked, “What have you found now, Roscoe? Doesn’t look too dangerous.”

---

Hands grabbed Zach and yanked him off his mount and he found himself sprawled on the ground. He slowly climbed to his feet. The pack and his saddlebags were searched.

---

“Well, sir,” the officer said, addressing Zach. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

---

“Like I told the sergeant, here, I’m just passing through. In fact, I was returning back the way I came when the patrol stopped me. I would be just fine if you would give me back my belongings and see me on my way. I promise that I won’t trouble you anymore.”

---

While Zach had been trying to talk his way out of the situation, the sergeant had placed Zach’s copy of the Gunnison Constitution and his journal on the table. The captain leaned forward and picked up the journal. Casually, he thumbed through it. Suddenly, his manner changed. He jerked his feet off the table and sat forward. He shot Zach a hard glance and ordered the sergeant, “Lock up the prisoner, sergeant. And be sure to place a guard on him.”

---

Sergeant Roscoe picked up a length of chain, a lock and a pair of handcuffs and led Zach to the opposite side of the road. He ordered one of the guards to accompany them. Wrapping the chain around the metal railing, he set the lock, leaving a three foot trail to which he cuffed Zach. As he walked

away, he ordered the guard, “Chas, don’t go near him. Stay on the other side of the lane line. Understand? Under no circumstances are you to approach him.” Chas nodded and took his stance where the sergeant had indicated.

---

Chas was no more than nineteen and he took his job seriously. He was a thin red-head with a mass of freckles and buck teeth. His blue eyes fastened on Zach and he gripped his rifle so hard his knuckles were white.

---

The sergeant had rejoined the Captain and they were looking over the journal. Orders were issued and three men were sent off. The officer tossed the journal aside and picked up the copy of the Constitution. As he read it, he sent piercing glances at Zach.

---

After inspecting the handcuffs and realizing that the razor blade sewn into his belt would do no good against steel, Zach asked his guard, “So, Chas, where are you from? Around here?”

---

Nervously, Chas glanced at his superiors at the table. He started to say something, but decided against it and looked over Zach’s shoulder.

---

“Oh, come on,” cajoled Zach. “What can it hurt to tell me where you grew up? I’m a little bored here. A little conversation can’t do any harm, can it?”

---

Chas hesitated and looked again at the Captain and Sergeant. When he saw they were not looking, he replied, “I’m from Manchester, New Hampshire. Well, just outside actually.”

---

“New Hampshire,” Zach repeated. “A long way from home, aren’t you? What, are you on a scavenging expedition or something?”

---

“Oh, no, we are putting the United States together again.” Once started, the boy was eager to talk. “We started with New Hampshire and Vermont. So far, we have gotten together with Massachusetts, Maine, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York and New Jersey. We were sent to look at Delaware, Maryland and Virginia. Another expedition is heading into Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Pretty soon this will be one country again.” As he finished, Chas’s voice became excited at the prospect of reunifying the country.

---

“Wow,” encouraged Zach. “That is impressive. Taken a while though, hasn’t it?”

---

Chas nodded. “Not everyone wanted to join, but, well, they eventually did.” He seemed to be hiding something, but Zach did not press him.

---

“Who’s the president, now? Who did you vote for?” he asked instead.

---

“There really haven’t been elections since the bombs went off. The president declared a state of emergency right after. Until we can get things organized, the emergency government will be in charge. But after that maybe there will be elections like in the old days. I don’t remember the last election; I was pretty young and not really interested, like.”

---

Zach attempted to look surprised. “Wait a minute. Wasn’t the president killed when the bomb went off in Washington D.C.? There must have been an election if there is a president.”

---

“No.” replied Chas. As if by rote, he said, “When the bombs went off during the State of the Union, James Markey, the Secretary of Agriculture was sent off. There was always somebody who left Washington to make sure that not everyone in the government was in the same place. By rite of succession, President Markey took office and formed the interim government.

---

“The capitol was temporarily moved to Manchester. Later, after New York joined, it was moved to West Point. One of the first Executive Orders was to streamline the Constitution. Because there were no members of Congress left, legislative power was given to the Executive Branch until such time as elections were held. This was part of the Emergency Power Executive Order.” Chas took a deep breath when he was finished, much as if he had successfully recited a memorized passage.

---

Zach sat back. A dictatorship, he thought. He remembered that several presidents had used Executive Orders to virtually eliminate the Legislative Branch.

---

After a few minutes thought, Zach asked, “That’s a pretty good looking uniform. Where did you get it?”

---

Chas looked down at himself proudly. “After we went through boot camp. We all got uniforms and swore our oath to protect the president and the government.”

---

“You mean the Constitution, don’t you?” Zach queried.

---

“No, it went something like, ‘protect the President and our

Government from all enemies, foreign and domestic'. I think that is what we said."

---

"Well, well, well," thought Zach. "Markey has himself a private little army. He managed to change the Constitution to give himself all the power and declared a state of emergency to wrap it all up. He made it so the army didn't swear to protect the law of the land, but the people at the top. Clever man."

---

On the hillside overlooking the interstate, Daniel and Jason were studying the situation. "Who are those guys?" murmured Jason. "They look like they're guarding an empty stretch of road."

---

"Doesn't matter who they are. What matters is that they have Zach and it was pretty casual until they pulled out his journal. There are too many of them to try and get Zach out of there."

---

They both said "Dad" at the same time and chuckled.

---

"Dad and if you think Ishtar Singh will be content to sit around, you would be wrong there," said Daniel. "How fast can you get back there and get help?"

---

"I am already gone," exclaimed Jason.

---

He dumped his pack, slid down the hill and raced off.

---

A few minutes later, a cavalcade rode up to the Captain's table. They dismounted and held a long conference with Captain Armstrong. They spent a considerable amount of time looking over the copy of the Constitution and the journal, much to Daniel's puzzlement.

---

Zach was prodded to his feet when the group approached him. The colonel in charge waved the pamphlet and journal in his face. "Where did you get this?" he demanded.

---

Getting tired of the way he was being treated, Zach snapped back, "That is a copy of the Constitution of the United States of America. I got it from the Printing Office in Gunnison before I left. You can have that copy. I have more." He folded his arms and leaned against the guard rail. "The other book is my private journal and I would like it back."

---

"Sergeant, bring some chairs and a table," the colonel instructed.

---

When a table and chairs had been set up, Zach was invited to sit. The



colonel, a major and a civilian in a suit and tie also sat. No introductions were made.

---

The civilian picked up the journal and leafed through it. "So, you have built a little empire out West. Thirteen states? Historic number, isn't it. Interesting. And now you have fourteen, with Tennessee." The man threw the book down and folded his hands on the table.

---

"What have you got to do with this United States government?"

---

"Not a thing," Zach lied. "All I have is the job of Justice of the Peace of Mitchell, Jefferson. Why are you so excited about it? I mean, what do you care?"

---

The small man studied his fingernails for a couple of seconds before he replied, ignoring the question. "That's hard to believe. What are you doing way out here, then? As I understand from your writing, Mitchell is somewhere in Colorado."

---

"No, Colorado is around Durango. Mitchell, on the other hand, is at the other end of the Rockies, the Canadian end, in the State of Jefferson."

---

The little man's moustache twitched as if he enjoyed the conversational dance. "There is no official State of Jefferson, nor Madison, Humboldt, Columbia, Palo Duro or Taos. But, I suspect you know that, Mr. Banducci. We are the legitimate heirs of the United States." He picked up the Constitution and dropped it again. "This is not the Constitution of the United States, but I suspect you know that also."

---

"Call me Zach, please," he said in a friendly fashion. "It does seem like we have a problem, here. Two separate groups have had the same idea. Both have set up the United States of America and have their own version of the Constitution. We should get together and join forces. Have a national election and really do it up right. What do you say?"

---

"You can call me Ambassador Kerry, please. Mr. Banducci, your suggestion is interesting, but, since we are the legitimate government, your proposal is ludicrous. I am sure that the legitimate United States Government would be most happy to meet with your representatives and take formal application for territorial status. We would then send governors, reestablish the proper boundaries, et cetera. After the proper time, when it is felt that you can govern yourselves, you will be admitted as states." He sat back and

steepled his fingers, his elbows on the arms of the chair.

---

“We have the same kind of program, Mr. Kerry,” Zach replied. “Those who want to join the United States apply to the government at Gunnison. We have a committee travel to their capitol and, if they meet a few fundamental criteria, they are admitted. Right now there are state governments being organized in the areas which used to be the states of Colorado, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Missouri, Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia. When they are ready, they will be able to apply for inclusion. Now, you having an existing government, I would be happy to take your official request to join us to Gunnison and my government. Would you like to draft this request now?”

---

As Zach named off the states, an angry look passed over Kerry’s face. He realized if the United States centered in Gunnison gained that amount of territory, his own government would see its legitimacy disappear. He slammed a hand flat on the table. “Enough of this farce. The legitimate government is ours, centered on the legitimate successor to the last President of the United States.”

---

“If you persist in this illegal and wrongful insistence that you represent the legal government of the United States, you will be transferred to West Point, the legitimate capitol and tried for treason. The penalty for that is death.”

---

“Whoa,” said Zach holding his hands up, palms out. “First, I never said I was a representative of any government. Two, if I was, I should be brought before your government as an ambassador or something. Third, whatever happened to negotiation? You have a position and I have a position.”

---

“Now, let’s cut the crap, shall we?” he snapped. “We both know that neither of us can speak for our capitols. You are trying to organize the locals, if you can find them. I’m on a road trip to look the country over. I have always had wandering feet. To answer an earlier question, I have a horse ranch and my biggest success is large horses used for logging and hauling. The bloodlines are getting a little thin and I was hoping to find new breeding stock, recruit a couple of families to come back with me to help drive the stock.”

---

“I would suggest that you communicate with your government, let

them know about this situation and get some instruction. Maybe they would want to join us, old son. You never know“

---

The ambassador signaled the sergeant to gather the table and chairs. When he walked away, the rest of his party followed him. Chas had been replaced by two other guards who ignored Zach's attempts at communication. Food, blankets and a foam mattress were brought and Zach settled down for the night.

---

Daniel ghosted down towards where Zach was being held prisoner, but the guards were too alert for him to make contact. He managed to scout the bivouac area. By his count, there were over a hundred soldiers and a couple of dozen civilians. It was a well run camp, the sentries were alert and relieved frequently.

---

Returning to his perch on the hillside where he spent a long night wrapped in his blanket, sipping on water from his canteen and eating jerky. He dozed until sunrise, stretched and moved a couple of miles down the road, beyond the forward sentry posts, to meet the expedition and brief them on the situation.

---

The first person he saw was Jason. After a quick greeting, he escorted Daniel back to the leadership. Daniel rapidly outlined the locations of the forward guards and the bulk of the troops.

---

“Give me four or five guys and I can take the ones on guard duty. We have to be careful, they are better trained and more alert than anyone else we have come up against. There are about a hundred troops and some civilians under the overpass. From the looks of things, Zach got them pretty pissed off yesterday and they will probably continue the questioning again today.”

---

Leo chuckled. “That's not surprising,” he commented. “Baxter, I guess that if the same group wants to grill him again today, we can pretty much take their command structure before they know what is going on. While Daniel and his men take care of the guard post, let's have Ishtar circle around and be prepared to pin down the camp. Let the Kentucky and Kansas boys go with him. The rest of us will hit the bridge in two hours or fifteen minutes after the interrogators leave camp, if they haven't by the time you get set, Ishtar.”

---

When the two groups set out, the rest had a cold breakfast and waited.

---

Daniel returned a half hour later to report that the position had been taken without a fuss. It had taken so long because they had come up while the guards were being relieved and the attack had been postponed until things settled down.

---

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee Rangers were dispatched to watch for activity around Zach. They were to report when the officers returned or Zach was moved. Again, they waited.

---

On the road, Zach had been taken to a small creek for his morning ablutions and then been fed. While he was eating, a table and chairs were brought. A half hour later a party rode up the off ramp. The same two officers and Ambassador Kerry took their seats. A secretary brought a large shoulder bag and emptied the contents onto the table. They consisted of Zach's journal and Constitution, some paper and pens and a different copy of the Constitution. Zach was freed and escorted to a chair.

---

"This is our version of the Constitution that you will be under. There are a few minor changes over yours, so there should be no problem with the transition. A party is being readied to accompany you back to Colorado. You have fourteen territories, along with the other, newly organized, territories. You also mentioned, in your journal, Missouri, the Sioux Confederation, the Cherokees, Durango and some other peoples occupying land claimed by the United States. All-in-all, there will be twenty-five territorial governors, their assistants and two hundred members of the United States Army. Other units will be organized from the militias you have assembled."

---

Zach picked up their version of the Constitution and flipped to the Amendments. He glanced at Kerry and the two officers when he saw that the Ninth and Tenth Amendments were missing. The First Amendment was rewritten to mention that offensive speech was illegal. The Second Amendment was rewritten to allow arms only to members of the 'duly authorized Armed Forces of the United States'. There was also an Additional Bill of Rights which included a right to a job, shelter, sustenance and respect.

---

After noticing these changes, Zach set the pamphlet on the table and smiled. "You have pretty much gutted State Rights and the Right to Bear Arms. I imagine that you have strengthened the powers of the Federal Government at the expense of the Peoples'.

---

“Gentlemen, I can tell you now, though it is not official, but the citizens of my United States would never agree to this. You are not stupid, so I know you have studied our copy of the Constitution and to call the differences ‘minor’ is an insult to our intelligence.”

---

Angrily, the Colonel leaned forward to glare at Zach. “Listen here, mister. We are the legitimate heirs of the United States. President Markey is the sole remaining member of government, which means that he is the legitimate president. As the Commander-in-Chief of the forces of the United States, that makes our armed forces the legitimate military.” The man began to turn purple when he saw the amused look that came over Zach’s face. Ambassador Kerry laid a calming hand the Colonel’s arm.

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“Let us see if we can find common ground, shall we?” he said. “Mr. Banducci, do you agree that President Markey is in that position because he was in line, according to the original constitution?”

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“Yes, as I understand it the Secretary of Agriculture is in line for succession.”

---

“Good, as president, he has the right to assemble a cabinet?”

---

Zach smiled and nodded.

---

“Excellent. Then the states which recognize him as president can elect a Congress to conduct the business of government?”

---

“Well, there I have to challenge you,” Zach said, leaning forward. “By your argument, the United States still encompasses the fifty-one states in existence before the collapse. Your government has disenfranchised those states which did not have a chance to elect representatives.

---

“As to your modification of the Constitution to redefine some clauses and add the Additional Bill of Rights, the ratification of any changes to the law of the land requires three-quarters of the states.”

---

“Do you agree that the president has the right to issue Executive Orders?” asked Kerry, ignoring Zach’s last statement.

---

“Only if they are not in contradiction to the Constitution. And, why don’t you comment on my last comment?”

---

“This is a state of emergency, wouldn’t you agree? One of the president’s EOs was the reorganization of the Constitution to answer it. This EO was approved by the Congress. And all of the states were represented. We appointed

representatives for all of the states in proportion to the last census, adjusted for the loss of life due to the bombs, disease and civil unrest.”

---

Zach laughed and leaned back in his chair. “Pretty convoluted. First,” Zach said, ticking his points off on his fingers. “most of the states have rules governing their elected officials. Residency rules, and all of that. Secondly, the states have to ratify Constitutional changes. Unless you set up state legislatures? Third, those gentlemen coming up the road may have something to say about this whole situation.” He pointed to the cavalcade riding slowly towards them. In front were the captured guards carrying a white flag.

---

The bridge sentries had all gathered around the table to listen to the conference and had not noticed the approaching riders. Staring in disbelief, the Colonel finally began barking orders and the sentries rushed to the sandbagged strong points.

---

Coming down the road were Leo and Baxter at the head of several troops. Zach waved and smiled. Ambassador Kerry had not moved from his chair.

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“You do not seem too worried,” he said.

---

“Unless your boys get excited, my friends won’t get too rambunctious,” Zach answered. “If I know my guys, Ishtar Singh and the rest are, as we speak, disarming everyone in your camp.”

---

Kerry called out to the Colonel to stand down. “What now?” he asked.

---

“Nothing. All my boys want is my freedom. After that, you go your way and we go ours.”

---

“We still have this situation of two United States. What exactly do you propose we do about that?”

---

Zach smiled at his verbal sparring partner. “You could always join us. Our constitution. We would have new elections and negotiate any sticking points. Your enemies are my enemies and vice versa. End this ‘state of emergency’ thing. Review all of those Executive Orders. What do you say?”

---

Kerry smiled in his own turn. “Or?” he asked.

---

“Or you have your United States and we have ours. We sit down with a map and see where we stand.

---

“However, now we should defuse the situation which is developing

over there.” Zach pointed to the standoff taking place between the two sides.

---

Kerry turned and saw that the Colonel was facing the leaders of the expedition. He slowly arose and strolled over, in the company of Zach, who performed introductions. Kerry presented his officers as Colonel John Blackman and Captain Kyle Kennedy and himself as Spencer Kerry. He invited them to sit.

---

As they walked back, he ordered Sergeant Roscoe to bring more camp chairs from the pile by the on ramp. By the time they were settled, Ishtar Singh rode up the ramp. He had a wide grin on his face and bellowed, “A fine day, my friends. The strangers are safely tucked in their camp with the rangers making sure they remain that way.”

---

Introductions were made and the large Sikh sat down and accepted a cup of coffee. “Friend Zach, you are a very naughty man. Going off, not telling your friends. Having adventures without me. How you are inconsiderate. It saddens me greatly.”

---

Zach apologized with mock humility. He brought them up to speed regarding the situation. Leo sat back and crossed his arms. Baxter shook his head.

---

“I have no objection to New England joining us,” said Baxter. “As long as they are willing to adopt our Constitution and show us that they have adhered to it in regards to elections, suffrage and all. But, none of us speaks for the United States, at least our version.”

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“I, uh, speak for the legitimate United States,” interjected Spencer. Leo snorted and began to enumerate his objections which were the same arguments Zach had made earlier. When he was interrupted by Kerry, he stopped and rolled a cigarette.

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“It seems that we have reached an impasse,” the Ambassador said. “How long would it take you to assemble a delegation?”

---

Zach adjourned his party out of earshot. “A couple of weeks, if we can reach them by radio; a month or so, if we have to send a rider?” he asked the others.

---

Baxter mused, “We could see if Gunnison trusts us enough to have us negotiate or, maybe, they have already sent someone to Camp Lejeune.”

---

“The only way we’ll find out is to try and contact them,” said Leo.

---

They returned to the table and asked for a recess for the rest of the day in order to contact their government. Ishtar Singh returned to the rangers. They had picked out a spot to camp.

---

As Leo organized things, Zack and Baxter attempted to contact someone. Fortunately, they were able to get the Virginians in the valley settlement, though there was a lot of static. Gus promised to relay the message down the line.

---

A team of radio operators waited for a reply. After a few hours, Gunnison sent a message back. President Callahan authorized Zach to speak for them, but any agreement would have to be ratified by the government.

---

Because of the other contingent from New England, Baxter volunteered to take troops into Pennsylvania to keep an eye on them and meet with any communities they found. Zach sent a messenger to the other camp to let them know that they had contacted their government and would like to meet in the morning. Kerry’s return message agreed to have his contingent at the overpass at 9:00 in the next day.

---

The fall morning dawned on an overcast day which threatened rain. When the groups met, Kerry suggested that they move the negotiations to a nearby town, which Zach accepted. An hour later they were seated around a table at a small diner. Each side provided a secretary to take minutes.

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“Mr. Kerry,” Zach started, “This whole thing boils down to whether one of us are willing to accept the government of the other. I know that we would have a problem with this. Our Constitution gives more power to the states then, even, the old Constitution. Can you live with that?” He finished by tapping on the copy of the Gunnison Constitution.

---

Kerry cleared his throat and took a drink of water. “We feel that a weak Federal government is an impediment to a strong country. A single, unified country, under the control of an umbrella government is the only type of organization guaranteed to create a powerful, fair, diversified and happy people. The original Constitution had inherent problems which the Supreme Court and progressive elected officials were slowly correcting. All we have done is take that a leap forward. We have, basically, brought the document into a modern world.

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“We now have a system which treats everyone exactly the same. There are no longer fifty-one governments with fifty-one conflicting and contradictory laws passed by fifty-one legislatures. The laws are uniform across state boundaries and fair to all.

---

“It only makes sense, Mr. Banducci, that our Constitution be adopted for the country as a whole.”

---

Zach sighed. “We look at government from a different angle. Each state has a unique set of problems. Yes, there is a need for umbrella organizations within a collection of sovereign entities. Defense, a court to oversee that the laws are followed by the entities and the Federal Government, Department of State for intergovernmental negotiations, Treasury.

---

“The original intent of the Founders was a limited Federal Government to handle those kinds of duties. Their ideals were local control by the people, relinquishing that control at the lowest level possible.

---

“Think of a white sheet of paper. That represents chaos where everyone does what they want, regardless of the effect on other people. Draw a line an inch from the left side of the border. The space to the right side of the line represents law which is followed by the individuals. Draw a line three inches from the right edge of the paper. This represents the power that individuals surrendered to state government. Halfway down the page, on the right, draw a horizontal line to the right edge of the paper. That space represents the power given by the individuals and states to a Federal Government. Divide that space into three even boxes. Those spaces represent the co-equal branches of the Federal Government.

---

“That, sir, is the original intent of the Founders. They realized it was the best method of governance to preserve the basic rights of citizens. To wit; Life, Liberty and Property,” Zach finished.

---

Spencer Kerry sadly shook his head. “These individual rights are fine in abstract, but impossible in action. All of the divisiveness weakens a country and they are subject to being overtaken by a more unified country. Look at what is happening to the scattered communities. These Mahdists you have told me about are picking them off one by one. Once a central power, Mitchell, was formed, you were able to fend them off. Can you not see the parallel?”

---

Zach looked at the notes he had taken and idly drew a line through all but the last sentence. "Mr. Ambassador, you are expecting me to take a leap of logic, here. You say that the government of Mitchell, a largish community, is equal to a Federal Government. But, we were a small community. The individuals agreed to gather together and form a cohesive unit. We formed a government, the largest block in the illustration, and we beat the Mahdists. But, when we spread out and established other settlements, we had a set of laws which governed those communities as a whole and, within the general laws; the individual communities passed their own statutes. We finally worked with the other states in to create our United States, but each state has their own statutes, again, within the Constitution. As in the original United States. That is the style of government that we live under and want to live under. This is the style of government that the Founders designed and it worked for several hundred years until the Progressive movement came along a hundred and fifty years, or so, ago."

---

Both sides agreed to communicate with their respective governments and meet again after. Neither delegation seemed to have much hope that the situation could be resolved.

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Later that day, the remaining leaders met with the troop commanders. With Baxter Ashe leaving with the Tennessee and Kentucky contingents, there were only the troops from Mitchell, Kansas, Missouri and Palo Duro. They all agreed that there needed to be an infusion of fresh men to enable them to complete their mission.

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After much discussion, they ordered the 10<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro Rangers to send out its first squad to contact the Virginians and ask for two troops and the second squad to ask the same from the North Carolinians. The rangers would remain and set up an intensive training program until those troops returned. Karl would undertake to train the four troops while they were with the expedition.

---

Zach attempted to call Jackson, Tennessee, but only managed to get one of the radio outposts just to the east of Virginia. He had them take down the results of the negotiations and ask for further instructions. After setting a contact time and frequencies, he signed off.

---

Daniel came in just after midday. He and his rangers had been

keeping an eye on the other camp. “An hour ago,” he reported, “three men left the bivouac. One went Northwest, one North and the other Northeast. Looks like they are contacting troops in the area or sending reports to their government.”

---

Leo, worried by the lack of their own troops, commented, “If they want to take us, they won’t have too much of a problem. We could recall Baxter, but then we let the other New Englanders would have a free hand.”

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Zach, Leo and Ishtar agreed that a picket line of rangers would be established and every trooper would be packed and ready to leave at a moment’s notice. The camp and picket details were written up and they settled down to wait.

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## Chapter 14

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### Unhappy Solution

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*Fall 2052*

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*Well, what an interesting development. We can see what would have happened if we had continued traveling down the Progressive Road. A rewrite of the Constitution along Social Justice lines and an elimination of the remaining rights for both the states and people. If you ask me, this is not going to end well. We won't settle on a combining of the two 'United States'. That means either war or uncomfortable truce. The way things stand, the only direction they can go is across Pennsylvania and into Delaware. We have pretty much closed them out of the trans-Mississippi and below Ohio. Unless, of course, they want to fight with the Caliphate and New Africa. That means our 'United States' will have most of the old states. They will have pretty much what the original secessionists were planning back about the Mexican War. That would leave them in trouble with the winters being as severe as lately.*

---

*From a short side trip to Baltimore, I have gotten myself in the middle of another mess. I hope Sarah will forgive me. I have a feeling that this will take a while. When the negotiations break down, there will be a lot of effort needed to prepare the defenses along whatever borders are agreed to. Baxter should be able to handle it, but if he asks, I guess, I'll stay. Sarah, Sarah, Sarah, I am tired of this. I know that this is the punishment I get for heading for Baltimore.*

---

The first of the Virginian troops came in with another troop of Virginians from the Chesapeake area. Over the next few days three more troops, one of rangers, from Virginia arrived along with two from North Carolina. With the added manpower, they were able to lengthen their lines and send two troops to reinforce Baxter, who had made contact with the New Englanders near Lancaster.

---

Daniel and his long-range scouts were positioned to give an early warning of troop movements from New England. The only sightings were messengers travelling north and south. Baxter Ashe, having returned from

Pennsylvania leaving command with Samuel Vilovic, forbade them to be interfered with.

---

Zach had set up camp in Hagerstown. The local residents were being organized into a government and representatives had been sent down the western shore of Chesapeake Bay, as far as it was safe, and east along the southern Pennsylvania border to contact other survivors.

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When an additional three troops, the 10<sup>th</sup> Kansas, 2<sup>nd</sup> US and the 6<sup>th</sup> Jefferson, arrived escorting the official representatives of Gunnison, Ishtar Singh took his rangers and the 1<sup>st</sup> US and the 6<sup>th</sup> Jefferson to explore Central Pennsylvania with the intention to organize a pro-Gunnison government. They took a team of advisers to represent the Western U.S. government.

---

Of the three other government teams, one was assigned to Virginia's nascent government being organized around Charlottesville. A second was assigned to North Carolina while the last was to remain in Hagerstown and take over the organization of Maryland and the negotiations with the New England U.S., much to Zach's relief.

---

A week after their arrival, a messenger from the New England United States rode into town. He presented a formal request that negotiations resume at Lancaster, PA. The man was put up, under guard, at the hotel and a meeting was called to formulate a response.

---

Robert Agnello was looking at a map of the old United States when Zach walked in. He had been happy to see his old friend as head of the negotiating team. Robert turned around and smiled, "We certainly have come a long way since meeting with the Aztecs, huh?"

---

Zach laughed. "If I had known what a pain this would all have been, I probably would have let the Smiths shoot me, way back when."

---

"Right," replied Robert skeptically. "You wouldn't have changed a thing. And, except for various bumps and bruises, you enjoyed it, though I won't tell Sarah."

---

The rest of the expedition leaders arrived. Leo, Baxter, Paul Gordon of the Virginians, Scott Randall Washington, leader of the West Virginians, Bo Kastle from North Carolina and Tom Gipp, who had just been appointed Defense Minister of the Sovereign State of Maryland. They gathered around the table and Robert presented the request.

---

Robert called for attention and said, "Meeting in Lancaster gives them an excuse to use that as a point on their north-south axis for a border between them and us. I know they won't expect a large concession on our part, but this would give them all of the Delaware peninsula and a good-sized chunk of eastern Pennsylvania.

---

After reviewing the map, Tom Gipp observed, "That gives them the majority of Maryland along with that sizable chunk of Pennsylvania and they claim all of New York, which puts them on top of any settlements in the state." The State of Maryland had plans to take a swath of southern Pennsylvania for Maryland.

---

Paul Gordon traced a line from Wilmington I-476 to where it joined I-81. From there he ran his blunt finger up to Syracuse then a line to Oswego, NY on the shore of Lake Erie. "Run this line by them. Down here, Philadelphia is pretty-well destroyed and useless and the line ends in Delaware Bay. At Oswego, we cut them off at the Great Lakes."

---

Leo chuckled. "I can't see them agreeing to letting go with all that chunk of New York. However, I like it. Bax, you want to take a vote?"

---

The plan was approved unanimously. The messenger was brought in and told that a meeting had been approved, but that the site was to be the Allentown Municipal Golf Club. Each side was limited to five representatives and thirty armed men. After a brief argument, the messenger left and was escorted out of camp by a half-troop of North Carolina rangers.

---

A week later, after a sweep by troops and a short battle with a small band of reavers, the delegations met in a tent provided by the Gunnison delegation. The long table and chairs had been retrieved from the Brew Works on the Green. There were no linens, so a pair of blankets covered the table. A refreshment table was set up at one end.

---

Robert Agnello, Zach, Tom Gipp, Paul Gordon and Baxter Ashe sat on one side and Spencer Kerry led his delegation in and introduced them as Colonel John Blackman, Captain Kyle Kennedy, Andrew Sacs and Mark Castro. A large, young man with his arms full of paper and supplies began laying out a small collection of paper and writing implements in front of each chair. When he was finished, he sat down and opened a book of bound, blank pages and made a notation at the top of the first page. He was introduced as

Michael O'Brian.

---

Robert motioned to Tim Stanley to join them as their note taker.

---

Sergeant Roscoe stood at attention by the door. Baxter chuckled and motioned to Daniel Appleton to take up a position on the other side of the opening.

---

“We done setting up?” asked Zach.

---

Kerry ignored him and asked to be allowed to make a short statement. Robert acquiesced and his opposite number opened a folder, took out a sheet of paper and began, “After communicating with the lawful government of the United States of America, I have been instructed to inform the representatives of the Gunnison collective that they may consider themselves as Territories to that lawful government. Governors, staff and a small number of troops from the lawful government will be dispatched to these territories. The following rules, but not limited to these, will set up the structure of the Territorial Governments.” When he was finished, he had his secretary distribute copies to the Gunnison representatives.

---

They read the rules with various reactions. Robert lay his copy down and squared it to the edge of the table as he collected his thoughts. “Let me go over this one-by-one, if you would. ‘All representative bodies will be recognized pending elections three months after the establishment of said Territorial Governments’, you will decide on the election cycle and we accept the fact that you will recognize them as legitimate. That puts us on an equal footing?”

---

John Blackman rose and started to splutter, but Kerry took hold of his arm and urged him back to his seat with a whispered word.

---

“The second point, ‘A militia will be established in each Territory under the command of an officer of the lawful United States Military.’ We have established militias under the command of their own officers.

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“Third. ‘All other weapons will be collected and placed in a secure location within each Territory under the control of the Territorial Governor.’ This is fallacious on two points: we do not recognize any Territorial Governor appointed by New England. The other point is the second amendment of our Constitution allowing citizens to keep and bear arms.

---

“Fourthly, ‘To support the expense of the Territorial Government, a

levy of ten percent of the physical goods, selected by the Territorial Governor, will be sent to the capitol of the lawful government of the United States of America.’ Again there are a couple of things about this one. We are not accepting a Territorial Government, so there is no expense in supporting something that will not exist. Furthermore, any levy would be a ‘tax’ and illegal, since we have no representation.

---

“The next one is ridiculous, ‘The Constitution of the United States presented to the aforesaid representatives of the Gunnison collective will be the law of the land. All other versions of any constitution are null and void.’ We govern ourselves with whatever Constitution we choose.

---

“And the last one. ‘The separate entities of the Gunnison collective will be reinstated as fully represented states upon the fulfillment of the conditions of Statehood.’ We are here to offer you the possibility of entering the United States of America under our rules.”

---

Kerry raised a hand to forestall the outbursts that began on his side of the table. He replied as if he expected the reaction he got from the Gunnison representatives, “Without going to war, these talks appear to be stalled. We know that we are the true representatives of the government of the United States of America. However, this country has gone through a long period of hardship and I will not condone that we exacerbate it.

---

“Until such time as we can convince you to accede to our reasonable requests, we will have to agree to disagree. Therefore, I suggest that the Gunnison forces go their way and we will go ours. Understand, we do not recognize you as a political entity, just as a set of fallen-away children that will come to their senses in the future. Meanwhile, we will continue to strengthen the lawful United States and be ready for when our recalcitrant brothers decide to see the wisdom of the situation.”

---

Zach smiled and shook his head. He looked at Robert for permission to speak and at a nod, asked, “Going our own ways. What exactly does that mean? Will you pick up and head back to Massachusetts?”

---

The Colonel snorted and Ambassador Kelly replied, “You must admit that Gunnison could never control any groups here in the east. We would anticipate the dividing line to be, say, the Mississippi/Missouri river system. When we have incorporated the intervening territory into the lawful United



States, we would be in a position to accept the Gunnison enclave into the family.”

---

Tom Gipp raised his hand and spoke, “What if the ‘intervening territories’ don’t have a yen to join?”

---

Anderson Sacs leaned forward. “Mr. Gipp, my position here is to determine the needs of the Territories which will form future states. Mr. Castro, here, has been appointed as the governor of Virginia. Lieutenant Jean LaSage and Sergeant Roscoe will be in charge of the military assigned to Mr. Castro.” He turned to Paul Gordon. “Mr. Gordon, if you would take the time to meet with Mr. Castro to determine his requirements, right after this meeting. Mr. Gipp, there are several other gentlemen from the government on their way. When they arrive, in a day or two, you will be able to meet the new governor assigned to the Territory of Maryland...”

---

Baxter Ashe interrupted, “Wait a minute. I’m from Tennessee. Are you telling me that you will assign a governor to Tennessee, which is a part of the United States of America with its capitol at Gunnison? Kentucky? Mississippi? Louisiana?”

---

“According to our agreement,” interposed Spencer Kerry. “That...”

---

“This is getting beyond ridiculous,” put in Agnello. “There is no agreement other than the one in your imagination. I have to say, it was a pretty slick attempt, but the citizens of any land within the old United States, from Maine to Southern California, Florida to Puget Sound, will control their own destinies.

---

“And Mr. Kerry. We will not hesitate to defend that right for any of the citizens, members of our United States or not. And we have had a lot of experience with this sort of thing,” he finished. The naked threat was now on the table.

---

Colonel Blackman jumped to his feet and shoved his finger at Robert. “You just try us,” he shouted.

---

At the door, Daniel had his Arkansas toothpick at Sergeant Roscoe’s throat. The sergeant slowly slid his half-drawn pistol back into his holster and moved his hands away from his body, fingers spread.

---

The rattle of arms was heard from outside and Baxter Ashe shouted for his men to stand down. Zach looked at the colonel, “If you don’t want the

bloodbath to start right here and now, you might want to do the same.”

---

“Sergeant, get them in hand,” was all he said, his face an apoplectic red. Roscoe ducked out the door.

---

“Daniel,” Zach said, “put the pig-sticker away, would you?”

---

Captain Kyle Kennedy tapped on the table. “I think a short break is in order, don’t you?” he said dryly.

---

When the meeting broke up, the Gunnison representatives walked off across the weed-choked lawn towards the brewpub. Daniel stationed a squad in a cordon around the building and followed the delegation.

---

“Well, that went as expected,” commented Robert when they joined Leo, Karl, Scott Washington and Bo Castle at a table. Leo stubbed out his cigarette and asked what happened.

---

Robert took a drink of water and began, “They gave us the rules for our joining them. When that failed, they ‘assumed’ that the boundary would be at the Mississippi/Missouri river line. They even had a territorial governor ready and waiting, just in case we were stupid enough to go along with their land grab.

---

“This afternoon, we will get down to the real negotiations. Now, we will find out how much of the land north of the Ohio River they expect to get. I would bet that they will want all of Pennsylvania and everything north of Kentucky to the Missouri River. That’s Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and maybe the next tier of states to the west. Leaving Iowa and the Caliphate to assert their own rights.”

---

“And New Africa,” snorted Karl.

---

Robert laughed and bowed to Karl, “And New Africa.”

---

One of the sentries came in and whispered to Daniel. He looked out the door and announced to the participants of the meeting, “Riders coming. Dad, it looks like Gregg finally showed up.”

---

The group broke up. Leo and Daniel climbed down the steps. Sitting on the lead mount at the head of a troop was Gregg Appleton, a wide grin on his face. He jumped off his horse and pounded his father and brother on the back. After an exchange of words, Leo pointed to the building and Gregg tossed his reins to another trooper. He followed Daniel and his father up the

steps.

---

“I’ve got a message for Mr. Agnello,” he said.

---

Zach swung another chair up to the table and they reassembled the meeting.

---

Without a preamble, he continued, “The Kentucky legislature sent a couple of troops north across the river and they found a mess...”

---

“Wait a minute,” Baxter interrupted. “Is there a beginning to this story?”

---

Gregg took a deep breath. “Okay, I was replaced in Alabama and brought my troop back to Franklin. Once there, I barely had time to report before Gunnison sent me to Kentucky. They had sent some news that I was to check out, then take a couple of available troops and find you and report. They are having trouble communicating again. The radio network is stretched too thin and there was a lot of static. They wanted to be sure you got the full account. I brought my 11<sup>th</sup> Rangers and the 4<sup>th</sup> Jefferson.

---

“The Tennesseans have organized a couple of new troops, I have those, the 8<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Rangers, and there were a couple of new ones in Kentucky, the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, and Missouri had sent a troop, the Springfield, to Kentucky for training. I have those, too.

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“Kentucky, after they had organized several communities along the south bank of the Ohio River and organized another four troops, sent a couple of expeditions across the river. They found a few people along the Ohio. They were in pretty poor shape, a lot of plague and all. The farther they got into Ohio, the fewer people they saw. Then a couple of troopers got sick. They were isolated and a medical team was sent to check them out. They had a variation of the plague, a more virulent variation.”

---

When he took a breath, Zach interjected, “They okay?”

---

“Yeah, they recovered, but the docs said that only because they had the original vaccine. They, the docs, are working on new medicine. The thing is, there doesn’t seem to be anybody left in Ohio, except along the river.”

---

“Come now,” snorted John Agnello, “they couldn’t have explored ALL of Ohio.”

---

Gregg replied, “I am just telling you what they said. Based on the

number of people they found in Kentucky and what they have heard about the census we took, the same density just isn't there. Doc White thinks that plagues have wiped them out. He ordered no new explorations until they have a bug killer that will protect them.

---

"Anyway, that's what I was supposed to tell you. Don't head through Ohio or Indiana or Illinois, where the same thing was found.

---

"Now, where do you want us to camp?"

---

There was some discussion about the Missouri troop, but it was decided that they should be treated like any other state troop or ally, as long as they behaved themselves. Gregg was ordered to watch them.

---

They returned to their discussion. The main topic was the availability of troops if the situation devolved into a shooting war. The new troops from the recently organized territories were only half-trained, at best. Baxter did not want to commit green troops and it was decided that they would fall back to the North Carolina/Virginia line if attacked by overwhelming numbers. Tom Gipp sent messengers to apprise the other state governments of the situation and ask them to hold troops in readiness if they were needed.

---

After lunch, they returned to the tent and resumed their places across from their opposite numbers. The New Englanders had brought an easel with them. On it they placed a large, covered square. Zach and Leo exchanged glances, each knowing instinctively that it was a map.

---

Spencer Kerry began, "Since you will not accept our first suggested boundary line, due to the inclusion in the Legitimate United States of several of the Gunnison Collective entities, we have the following suggestion." He rose and flipped the cover off the map on the easel. It was an AAA map of the United States. A thick, black line was drawn from the Canadian border at Puget Sound, to the Idaho border, south along the western border of Idaho, bisecting Nevada to the Mexican border and west to the Pacific. Another line followed the southern border of Idaho and straight through Wyoming to the Nebraska line. It then followed the southern Nebraska border, the southern Missouri border, up the Mississippi to the Ohio River. The line then followed the Kentucky, Pennsylvania borders to the Atlantic, including Delaware.

---

"From our earlier conversations, original Washington, Oregon and California on the West Coast, the southern edge of Wyoming, Colorado, New

Mexico, Texas, Kansas, and Arkansas West of the Mississippi and the Kentucky/West Virginia/Maryland line south are claimed by the Gunnison Collective. In that case, the rest of the original United States and Canada are claimed by the Legitimate United States.

---

“We will give you sufficient time to remove your forces from our territory. My government would like to establish formal negotiations between any entity of the area known as the Gunnison collective with the intention of establishing it as part of our legitimate hegemony. Your stated intent being that these entities have the right to govern themselves and choose their own affiliations.”

---

With a supercilious smile he sat and folded his arms across his chest. The members of his team stared a challenge across at their counterparts.

---

Robert Agnello stood and walked around the table to the easel. Knowing that something like this would be presented, he came prepared with an assortment of markers and he selected one. Before making a mark on the map, he addressed the New Englanders, “Regardless of our wishes, there are a few others who will have something to say about your ‘art work’”. He tapped Northern Utah. “The Mormons occupy Deseret.” Another tap, this time on the Montana/Dakotas border. “A few members of the Sioux Confederacy may dispute this area.” He touched Oklahoma. “The Cherokee here...” A tap on Four Corners, “and the Pueblo here.” A series of touches on Missouri, Wisconsin and Iowa. “The Missouri reavers, New Africa and the Caliphate.”

---

He uncapped his red marker and outlined the areas mentioned. “And Deseret, the Sioux, the Pueblo, the Cherokee and the Missouri ..um.. government are allies.” Moving to the east, he ran a red line along the line agreed upon by his delegation from the Chesapeake straight north to Lake Erie. “This, gentlemen, is the line on which we are prepared to agree.”

---

Spencer held up his hand to forestall his delegation. “You realize that this will mean war?”

---

Robert maintained a bland expression. “That would be regrettable, sir,” he answered. “As you have stated, this nation, nay, the whole world has gone through a terrible ordeal. I would have peace, but that boundary is our line in the sand.”

---

Kerry sighed. “In the spirit of compromise, I will present this to my

government, but I am afraid that they will reject your none-too-generous offer. I would ask that the truce be kept until we both have an answer. I am assuming that you will present our offer to Gunnison?”

---

Robert nodded and the meeting broke up.

---

Zach waited impatiently until they had walked out of earshot. “You are not seriously going to present his plan, are you?”

---

Agnello laughed, “Of course not. It would serve no purpose and I have complete authority to come to an agreement. Actually, I have given them all I am prepared to give up. They will counter and expect me to surrender territory. However, as they say, ‘that ain’t gonna happen’.

---

“Now, before supper is served, I want a meeting with young Mr. Appleton to see how things are going with the organization efforts in the South. Care to join me?”

---

Robert called an orderly and instructed him to request the presence of Gregg Appleton. The Secretary of State settled back and talked about the general efforts for rebuilding the United States and the probability of Kentucky, Colorado and Texas as adding the next stars to the flag. Zach asked about any possibility of the Mormons signing on.

---

“Now that is an interesting question. I have had a few conversations during the Constitutional Convention with the Elders. You know their biggest point of opposition?” Without waiting for Zach to answer, he did it himself, “They don’t like bigamy, though I am under the impression that it is not a universally held view.”

---

At that point Gregg announced himself and entered. After the usual greetings and offers of refreshments, he sat and asked, “What’s up?”

---

Robert leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “I get a lot of reports from my teams in the field, but you have actually been in Alabama during the organization and I would like to have you give me your impressions on how it is going and any problems you see.”

---

Gregg thought a moment. “I was mostly involved with the training of the troops in Dothan. I did what I could to help setting up a government until Trace Smith and his team showed up. The feeling I got was that Dothan had been rethinking being part of the new Alabama and wanted to set up a state of their own. The first month or so, they ran a lot of sweeps and contacted some

groups that wanted to join, others didn't. We cleaned out a couple of nests of reavers and that freed a lot of families that had been under their thumbs.

---

"Trace got the political side going, registering people, setting up voting districts, dropping off copies of the Constitution and, when they had their first meeting about their own State Constitution, he helped draft it. I think the most important thing was his talking to the Gadsden government and being kind of a mediator between them to get the two state idea across.

---

"Eventually, however, they decided to keep together, but the State Constitution allows for a split if three-quarters of the population wanting to split goes for it. There would be a commission to divide property and all. Relocation. That kind of thing.

---

"The troops we formed were doing alright. They got their butts whipped a couple of times going against reavers without any kind of plan, but then they straightened out when Carl's guys got there. That's when I took my men and returned to Franklin."

---

He pulled out a map that he spread out on the table. "When we were heading for Tennessee, we did some scouting around and there is a lot of land in eastern Alabama and western Mississippi that is just standing empty. I know it sounds kind of crazy, but shouldn't we do something to preserve the buildings and locate people who wanted to move there. I hate to say it, but those reavers from Louisiana may have had a good idea there."

---

Agnello sat back and closed his eyes. "That's the problem we have been worrying over. We don't have enough people to fill the land and there is nothing to keep someone like the Mormons or Missourians or the Sioux or the Aztecs from moving in and settling."

---

He picked up the map and saw where Gregg had outlined the spheres of influence of existing settlements. "This is a great map, Gregg. It matches ours almost exactly. Its too bad we don't have any contact with overseas which we could use to attract settlers. Hell, we don't know if there is any 'overseas' anymore. We are going to need a planner, here, to work on this project.

---

"When we get this all settled down, how would you like to form a new group to look into this? Call it the Colonial Recruitment Department." He began to get excited at the new idea that began to flower. "Offer the land to people from nearby states first, then expand to other states or territories. After they

are set up, they can annex themselves to an existing government or form their own states.”

---

Gregg, as excited as his new boss, interjected, “That would be an incentive for existing states to get their own people out to settle, wouldn’t it?”

---

Seeing that he was a fifth wheel, Zach quietly wandered out of the tent. He thought of the battle ahead for Gregg with his wives and mother. “I should tell Robert to lay it out about the amount of travel is in store for him. Maybe we can set up a mobile home for him so he can bring his family along. Too bad we don’t have networks still working and he could stay at The Lake and teleconference. Not my problem, I am retiring soon!”

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## Chapter 15

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### New Wrinkle

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*Fall 2052*

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*We will find out what the New England United States are willing to put up with. If this was us, I know that I wouldn't waste spit on our proposal. Baxter is going to send out a call for troops. Gunnison can start the militia moving. They can be called back, if nothing happens.*

---

*Leo was really glad to have his boys back in the same place. His only disappointment is that Cathy isn't here. He misses her and I can understand it. I have been away from The Ranch and Sarah for way too long. Anyway, Lizzie and David are getting married and I have to give the bride away. Of course that depends on if they have waited. No, Sarah would never let them tie the knot without me. At least I don't think she would.*

---

*I know I said this before, but now I mean it: I am done with all of this. When we are done here, I am doing what that old song said, I will "nail my shoes to the kitchen floor, lace them up and bar the door." Jeez, here I am, misting up and I haven't even had a drink.*

---

*I hope the Medical Team comes up with a vaccine which will beat the new plague virus. If not, we can kiss the states of Ohio, Illinois and Indiana good-bye. That would mean that we would have to patrol the borders constantly to prevent anyone infected from coming south of the river. That would mean a couple of dozen troops which Kentucky does not have, at least not now. Of course, if the plague gets into the Caliphate, that might fix our problem there.*

---

*I will have to remind Bax to have the messengers warn Missouri about the new plague. I wonder if the sending of the troop by the Missourians is the opening move to join us. That is just too much to accept. For the last dozen years I have been fighting reavers and now there is a group of them that may want to sign up. Raphael must trust Gabriel enough to believe he couldn't be fooled. I'm glad that I don't have to decide on this.*

---

*Somebody at Leo's tent next door. I'm being paged!!*

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Jason was Officer of the Watch and he had awakened his father. Leo heard him out and called Zach, who joined him. Two of the sentries had brought in a young man in the uniform of the New England United States. Zach recognized Chas, his first guard.

---

“Chas?” he said with a nod.

---

The young man looked woebegone. He nodded back and started to say something but, after a look at his guards, he shut his mouth. Zach brought out a chair from Leo’s tent and told the prisoner to sit. After sending the guards back to their posts, he asked if Chas would like something to eat or drink.

---

Baxter arrived just then. He was tucking in his shirt and his hair was rumpled. With a yawn, he asked, “What is going on? Who is this?” He waved at the prisoner.

---

Chas jumped to his feet. “I just wanted to talk to Mr. Banducci, sir.”

---

Zach laid a hand on his shoulder and pushed him gently back in his chair. “I’m here, Chas, what’s up?”

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With a rush, the soldier said, “I want to join you. I don’t have anybody back home and I’m tired of them.” He said with a wave at the New England camp.

---

Baxter took charge and led everyone back to his tent, which was large enough to accommodate them all. When they were settled, he asked, “Well, son, why don’t you start from the beginning.”

---

Nervously licking his lips, he began, “Well, I thought that we were doing real good things. I’ve been taught that we are rebuilding the country and I should, and was, real proud of that. We had a lot of trouble with bad guys when I was little and then the soldiers came in and cleared them out.

---

“My dad grumbled when the new rules were posted, but said that being safe was worth the price. They didn’t ask too much, just some of the stuff we raised and we had to join work parties once a week to, you know, rebuild towns, clear rubble and find stuff that was usable.

---

“There were still bouts of the plague, of course, but there wasn’t anything to do about that. The government did have doctors and nurses that helped, so it wasn’t too bad. They couldn’t save my family; they died from

plague while I was in boot camp. A lot of people were not too happy about the rules and some talked about not being represented and being told what to do all of the time. Some were arrested and a couple disappeared, but I thought that they were just trouble-makers.”

---

He coughed and accepted a glass of water. “Then I met you guys. Zach seemed nice and, when I got the chance, I snuck one of the Gunnison Constitutions and read it. I compared it with ours and there were a lot of differences. I’ve been thinking and I can see where the differences were important and I could have more say in what was going on in Gunnison, so I sneaked off and, well, the rest you know.”

---

“All right, son,” said Baxter after a few minutes thought. “You can join us, if you want. You realize that you can’t do just anything you want. We have rules, too.” At Chas’ nod, he continued, “Are there a lot of people who don’t like what is going on in your United States?”

---

“Yeah,” Chas answered. “Most of the soldiers are stationed in settlements. The government has said that only the authorized towns can be lived in and authorized farms around the towns. There are soldiers in every town and you can’t serve in the town where you were raised or your family is.”

---

“Classic,” Leo said. “Army occupies outside the territory of its members. Separate the locals from the law. Rome started it and it has been a tactic ever since.”

---

“Can I stay?” Chas asked anxiously.

---

“Not a problem,” answered Ashe. “Jason, take Chas, get him something to eat and find him a place to bivouac, will you? And maybe a different set of clothes,” he added as an afterthought

---

When the two had left, Baxter turned to Zach. “Think he’s real or a plant?”

---

“If he’s acting, he deserves an Oscar. I would say that he is sincere. And, if it is true, then the New England United States could be ready to collapse. I thought it was odd that they had only gotten as far as New York in all these years. They had a big lead on us with a president and troops to rally around him. I am guessing that they have had to put down more than one revolt and they can’t confiscate all of the guns that are around.

---

“I would bet that they have to overwhelm the locals, get what weapons they can, find a locale where they can assemble the people and establish a garrison. That takes time and effort and is necessarily slow.”

---

Leo interjected, “Let’s see what Rob thinks. He is pretty smart about these things.”

---

Unwilling to wait until morning, they woke him up and presented what they had learned to him. After discussing it, they decided that Agnello would speak with the man and make a decision afterwards.

---

The next morning, they assembled after Robert had talked to Chas. He thought that they could believe what the prisoner said and that that changed the picture. If there was trouble in New England, the threat for war was empty.

---

“Could we ‘liberate’ the New Englanders?” asked Ashe.

---

“We might,” answered Zach. “The only thing is: would it unite them like an invasion has a tendency to do? If we leave them alone, they might fall like any other dictatorship has a history of doing. We have a lot of work to do with the organizing of the east here. Gregg said that Alabama is coming along, but a lot of territory hasn’t even been explored and a lot more is just plain empty. Florida hasn’t been touched. Mississippi is just starting off and Maryland, North and South Carolina, Virginia. Nobody has done anything about Appalachia. Ohio and Indiana are plague ridden and Pennsylvania is a mystery. Just those efforts will take a lot of men, time and material, without a war to throw into the mix.”

---

Robert cleared his throat and inserted a thought. “This Chas said that he met you, Zach, and read the Constitution and that convinced him to emigrate. I don’t know about you, gentlemen, but I have a dozen or so copies of the Constitution. What if we gather what we have, within reason, and leave them around? Get a few of them circulating in New England and stir the pot that way.”

---

Everyone had a few copies of the Constitution with them and they were able to assemble almost a hundred when they were all gathered together. Robert kept a dozen for use when they met new groups. The rest were taken by the troopers who mixed with the New Englanders to trade and talk.

---

They discussed sending Chas back to speak with his messmates, but

the idea was rejected. Zach was worried that the New Englanders would find out and charge him with treason or sedition.

---

After the next day's trading session, Daniel reported that the Constitutions had been snapped up. There were even a couple more inquiries about joining Gunnison.

---

Two day dragged by with no more official contact with the New England delegation. At sundown, Ishtar Singh returned with the 6<sup>th</sup> Jefferson. They were escorting four strangers.

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"My brothers," Ishtar Singh roared. "Look what I have found. Another Missouri in the middle of Pennsylvania."

---

After the usual rough greetings from their large friend, Ishtar Singh turned and motioned the strangers forward. "This is Bobby Ott the leader, and Cora Sanchez and Kim Pendleton. They are reavers. But they are good reavers. And this, this is John Savage. He is Amish with a good fine beard. They are having a group near Altoona. They have farms and horses and more Amish. Very nice."

---

The three reavers looked amused. Kim Pendleton's narrow, black face had a broad grin splitting his thick, black beard. Cora Sanchez swaggered up and thrust out her work-hardened hand at Zach. Bobby Ott was chewing on a rude cigar and standing with his thumbs hooked into his belt. John Savage stood straight, with a severe face, and nodded.

---

After shaking hands, Zach introduced his compatriots and invited the newcomers into the meeting tent which had been set up in camp as a gathering place. Leo spread out a map of Pennsylvania and they located Altoona, east of Pittsburgh.

---

After the introductions, Zach understood the reference to Missouri. These were apparently reavers who had carved out a territory where they were protecting the Amish population in exchange for supplies.

---

This was confirmed when Bobby said, "Well, according to Ishtar Singh, I guess we were not technically reavers. My dad was the mayor of Altoona when the Troubles started. The first thing he did was try to isolate his town and organize a group to defend it. He was able to nail a few of the gangs that sprang up, mostly from Pittsburgh and recruited a few dozen ex-soldiers and state and local police. He decided that they needed the Amish farms for

after the immediate supplies were used up and he set up forces in a ring around as much territory as he felt he could defend.

---

“He sent out groups to bring in supplies and anyone who wanted to join us. I will admit that they took what wasn’t nailed down, regardless if anyone claimed it or not, so that would make us reavers, of a sort, I guess. Now, understand, molesting women wasn’t allowed, they punished anyone who did, too. Some of the ‘recruits’ were forced into the defense force and others were set up on farms. Dad set up a kind of serfdom organization. Recently, we have done away with it and anyone who wants can move around, leave the area or join the Elites.”

---

“Elites?” asked Agnello innocently.

---

Ott colored slightly. “That’s the nickname the fighters got. They were protecting the civilians, so they got the cream of stuff. You know, the best of the loot, um, supplies that were brought in and the local products.”

---

“What now?” asked Zach, thinking that they had another rogue group they could not trust.

---

“We come to sign up,” said Kim Pendleton in surprise.

---

“‘Sign up’?” queried Zach.

---

Cora tapped the table and got everyone’s attention. She slouched back in her chair and rested her right ankle on her left knee. With a slight lisp she said, “Why don’t you let me explain? We know about the New England government. What we know, we are not too impressed with. They are a little controlling.

---

“You guys, on the other hand, are a little more lax. You know, self-determination and all. Since we know that we cannot stand up to them, even if you leave us alone, we have to have a big brother.”

---

Robert Agnello took a copy of the Gunnison Constitution and slid it across the table to her. “Have you read this?”

---

Sanchez read the title and nodded. “Yeah. Ishtar showed us a copy and told us to read it before we made a decision. We read it, we discussed it and we decided that we can live with it.”

---

“Whoa,” said Leo. “‘live with it’? You have to *want* to live *by* it. This isn’t like some suit of clothes that you put on until the New Englanders go

away and then do what you want. We will send a representative from Gunnison to help you set up a state constitution and organize the first set of elections. When you get up and running, then you apply to Gunnison for statehood. If you have done everything that is required, and the other states vote you in, only then do you get a star on the flag.” He had leaned forward as he spoke and stabbed the table with his finger as he spoke. When he was finished, he leaned back and folded his arms, giving each of them a look.

---

Bobby Ott took the twig out of his mouth and said, “No, we understand all of that. If we join up, then we join up to stay. Send your rep and we will see that everything is followed and we will apply for statehood.”

---

“Look, we know that things are changing. With New England on the north and you to the south, we are going to have to join somebody, like Cora says. And Ishtar told us about the Mahdists, too. From what we have seen, you are the horse to bet on.”

---

Zach held up his hand. “With all you have been saying, I can understand your wanting to join us and welcome. However, this would not be a decision of the reavers or Elites. Everyone in the community would have to participate in a monitored election process and the majority would have to approve.”

---

“Robert, this is your venue. Should we send a rider to Gunnison and get some more of your organizers out here?”

---

The meeting broke up after that. Ishtar Singh escorted the three reavers to quarters. Zach asked John Savage to remain behind for a little talk. The tall, silent Amish sat and waited.

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Zach began with a preamble, “Mr. Savage. You heard what the others said. That they are considered ‘elite’ and you are, or were, in the position of serfs, tied to the land. That is not how we work and the institution would have to be completely dismantled before Gunnison would consider including Altoona as part of the United States. What are the thoughts of you and your people?”

---

For the first time since they had met, the gray beard split in a smile. “I heard what they said. Yes, the English had told us that we were not to move off the land. We understand the reasoning for this. My faith is what you would call pacifist. We do not hold with war. Therefore, my people were victims of

the gangs. We suffered theft, beatings and other crimes of which I will not speak. When we heard of Altoona, we met and decided to seek them out.”

---

He leaned forward and, with a twinkle in his eye, asked Zach, “You have a pipe. If I were to tell you that as a rule you have to smoke the pipe, what would you say?”

---

Zach smiled. “I would probably obey that rule. But what does that have to do with anything?”

---

“Och. We are farmers. When we settle, we put down deep roots and become one with the land. So, when the English tell us that we must stay on the land and farm, we happily obey.”

---

Robert laughed. “I take your point. What about their taking of what you raise?”

---

John shook his head and replied, “Before the bad times, we paid taxes when we purchased goods or on our farms and property. The only difference is that the taxes are paid in goods, not paper. Even we pay less than we did, they do not take as much.”

---

Leo interjected, “But what if you wanted to leave? Wouldn’t this serfdom thing get in the way?”

---

Savage looked surprised. “If we did want to move, then we would move. It would be Gottes Wille if we were stopped and forced to stay.”

---

The three men from Gunnison looked at each other and Zach said bemusedly, “Thank you, Mr. Savage. I think that answers all of our questions. Do you need anything?”

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The elderly Amish stood, put on his flat-brimmed hat and said, “No. My people will accept the decision of the community and live as we must.” With that, he turned and followed a trooper to his quarters.

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“Well, Robert, do we sent for more ‘organizers’?” Leo asked.

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Robert waved a hand, “Let’s get a couple of troopers on the road. Looks like we have another group of recruits.”

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## Chapter 16

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### Missouri Meeting

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*Fall/Winter 2052/2053*

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*Well, Amish. Another group to work with. At least this religion, sect or whatever isn't forcibly trying to convert anyone. Better find a library and read up on them.*

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*And what about Chas? Our first deserter from the New Englanders. His news was pretty surprising, too. It seems that they are not able to contest our demands, even if they are willing to go to the mat with us. I wonder if we should send a few scouting parties into New England and stir up a little trouble. Probably not. I have a feeling that it will fall apart on its own, especially if we can organize Maryland, Pennsylvania and Delaware and establish some sort of trade network with New England. Even if trade is not allowed, the black market will take care of it.*

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*Karl is whipping the several troops into shape in Maryland. They have six from Maryland, five from Virginia and two from West Virginia. A group of families have sent a request from Delaware to send help, so the New Englanders have lost out there.*

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*The 1st Jefferson Rangers are working with the Pennsylvanians. Ishtar Singh found several other groups of families around Lake Erie, at Williamsport and Beaver, north of Pittsburgh. He found that Pittsburgh had been mostly torched and had run into some opposition at the ninth street bridge and had backed off. Apparently, there is a large group that has cleared some parks and other land and is pretty self reliant. They don't raid, so they don't seem to be a problem. When we have things organized in the rest of the area, there will be plenty of time to try to contact them. That could be another problem: enclaves of citizens who don't want to join us or, maybe, join some other group. I wonder how our self-determination philosophy would hold up on that.*

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The next week went by slowly. The troops sent out to patrol met with no problems. They found a few families tucked into the fertile valleys of

Pennsylvania and along the coast of the Chesapeake. These they brought in or gave a copy of the Gunnison Constitution and information on who to contact if they were interested in joining one of the several states. The local reavers seemed to have melted away. The only break in the routine was when a Kentucky troop found the skeletons of several elephants, apparently escaped from a zoo or wildlife park and brought back the tusks as trophies.

---

The new coordinators arrived with mail. Zach received a rather pointed letter from Sarah. David had been given leave and he had accompanied the family back to The Ranch in order to start work on a house. She was curious about when 'her absent and half-forgotten husband would join them'.

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With that as a spur, he tracked down Robert Agnello to let him know that he was heading back home. He met Leo coming out of Robert's tent with a letter in his hand. They both laughed when Zach waved his own missive at his friend.

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"You, too?" asked Leo. "Cathy has informed me that quote, if you cannot find the time to come home, I will be looking for a new helpmeet, end quote. I just told Robert that I'm heading back."

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"That's about the upshot of it," answered Zach. "I have a wedding to be a part of, a house to build and many apologies to deliver."

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"I figured that you would get your hide blistered, figuratively, when you read Sarah's letter. Bob has given us permission to take 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers and beat it. He has enough new troops from around here and he is starting to rotate the Gunnison troops out. Ishtar Singh has been recalled from wherever he has wandered off to and will join us."

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"What about the other Gunnison troops? Are they going back, too?" Zach asked.

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Leo looked at the back of his envelope and read from his notes, "The Missouri troop, the troops from Kentucky, Tennessee, Jefferson, Kansas and Palo Duro are released from service with the thanks of the Government of the United States. The only troops to stay will be the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S."

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They split up to inform the leaders of the dismissed troops. It took another week to recall all of the scattered men. On a day bright with the early Fall sun, the cavalcade pulled out.

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After picking up the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers, they skirted Pittsburgh and rode down I-75 to Charleston. They met the 5<sup>th</sup> West Virginia guarding the border with Ohio to prevent anyone infected with the super plague from crossing over the river. They were part of an expedition which consisted of three troops and four coordinators from Gunnison who were getting the area organized.

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At Charleston, they caught I-64 and headed to Hopkinsville. When they arrived, they discovered that the Kentucky legislature had voted to apply for entry into the United States. Zach declared that he would be proud to escort the official delegation and their formal letter of application to Gunnison. They dropped off the Kentucky troops and picked up another one for the official escort. The Tennessee troops headed south toward Jackson.

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Several days later they left and wended their way west towards the ferry at Port Girardeau. It took most of a day to ferry the troops, animals and supplies across and they spent the next day at the bustling town built on the ruins of its predecessor. The Missouri Springfield troop bought a keg of the local spirits and proceeded to throw a party for the Gunnison troopers.

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Taking another day to recover, Zach asked the mayor to send a messenger to John Benson to ask permission to pass through his territory. The functioning members of the party spent the day buying supplies, trading horses and building a rapport with the Missourians. They set off after Zach received a message from the Missouri government asking them to meet with a delegation at the capitol established in Fort Leonard Wood.

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The Gunnison troops were met with a great deal of pomp and circumstance. Three Missouri troops, in full regalia, were drawn up and escorted them to the center of town. There the troopers were welcomed by the mayor, city council and various dignitaries. Since there were the exact number of chairs needed for the Gunnison and Kentucky contingents, it was obvious that careful preparations had been made for the visit.

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After the usual welcoming speeches, they were escorted to the Fort. It had been a training center for Military Police, Chemical/Nuclear Weapons and Engineering battalions before the Troubles. One group or another had partially burned and stripped it of most usable equipment and all weapons, including the decorative artillery piece that had stood in front of the main

building.

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There were signs of new buildings and the existing buildings had all been repaired. A wooden sign at the gate proclaimed the Government of the Independent State of Missouri. Another sign inside the gate pointed to State House, Governor's Mansion, Visitor's Area and Training Complex, among others. The escorting officer dismissed the honor guard and provided guides for the troopers to the visitor's area and their billets.

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"Will you gentlemen please come with me?" asked an officer wearing a camouflage uniform with no patches, but with a red sash under her utilitarian webbed belt. "My name is Major Haskins. Governor Benson would like to apologize for not meeting you himself, but his duties kept him. I am your liaison during your visit. If you have any needs, please do not hesitate to ask."

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The four leaders followed the trim figure of the short, black woman to the VIP quarters. They were shown rooms and handed a map of the complex with areas marked as out of bounds. At the bottom of the sheet was a schedule of events, including meal times and a meeting with the Governor. They noticed three guards sitting at the left end of the hall.

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The major indicated them and said, "Those troopers are assigned to answer any questions or to find me if there are any problems and to act as guides when you leave the VIP complex, if I am not available."

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"There should be everything you need in your rooms, if not, again, do not hesitate to ask. My office is at the end of the hall and I am usually there." She pointed to the door at the other end of the hall on whose glass panel her name and rank were painted.

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Leo asked her if they were allowed free access to the facility and she answered they were free to move about with the exception of the areas marked on the map. She left them to freshen up for dinner saying that she would return in time to guide them to the Mess Hall.

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They inspected their rooms and met in Zach's. Ishtar Singh paced the floor, unhappy at being separated from his troopers. Leo slouched in a chair and built and lit a cigarette. Kyle Wolnich, the Kentucky representative sat in an armchair, Zach lay on a bed, hands clasped behind his head and observed, "We could be prisoners or we could be pampered guests. Or, since we still

have our arms, we may be both or they can't decide. Leo, what do you think?"

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"Guests, with limited privileges, I imagine. Doesn't matter, does it? They must want something."

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Ishtar Singh stopped and boomed, "I am unhappy, friend Zach. The only thing to make this a cage would be bars on the windows."

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"Well, let's wash our face and hands, put on a clean shirt and take a walk, shall we?" he replied rising.

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After cleaning up, Zach stepped into the hall and approached the major's door. His knock was answered with a negligent 'Come'. He entered and the major rose from behind the desk. At his request to visit his troopers and see that they were settled in, she asked if she could show them the way and they exited to find Kyle, Leo and Ishtar waiting with the escort.

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As they walked to the Visitor's Barracks, Major Haskins gave them the history of Fort Leonard Wood after The Troubles. "The commanding officer at the time tried to keep his units together and provide protection to the surrounding area. When the plague hit, the command structure broke down and the survivors began to desert and the last handful opened a weapons shop and supply depot.

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"The armory here was fairly extensive, since it was a boot camp and training center. There were a lot of small arms, explosives, chemical and toxic weapons and a warehouse full of ammunition. Even with the deserters grabbing what they could carry, there was still a lot of ordnance around. This group hid most of it in one of the underground bunkers and got rid of any maps which showed their locations.

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"After that, they started taking orders and recruiting. They got to be a hundred and fifty or so and were pretty cocky..."

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Leo interrupted, "No one tried to take over?"

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Haskins replied, "Yes, there were a few attempts by various gangs, but they had the place wired. There were explosives buried all over the place. Some with trip wires or infrared sensors, others on a direct contact switch. For the first few years, apparently, there were numerous tries, but none was successful. You should have seen the mess when we got here; buildings blown up and a lot of holes in the ground. It took us several months and a few casualties to clear the place out.

---

“Anyway, they tried to cheat one of General March’s bunch. They sold them the artillery piece that stood at the front of the Admin Building. It was non-functional and they thought it was a good joke until March showed up with a small army.

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“The Fort Wood gang knew they couldn’t stand them off and they tried to run, but were unsuccessful. The ones that weren’t killed, General March had shot. The general didn’t realize that there were any weapons hidden and so the secret kind of died with them. He stripped the place of the material he found and left.

---

“The upshot was, John Benson was assigned this territory and we moved in. Like I said, it took us a while to disarm the whole place. We set up shop and someone found a map they missed in the museum archives. That sat around until it was compared with the only other maps we found and the bunkers were noticed. We found the cache and were able to stand off the General’s request for the young men. After the General’s death, we spread out and knocked off the worst of our neighbors and went independent. Since then we have been spreading out and forming a Gunnison-style state, especially after you guys met Gabriel. He was the one who convinced John to send the Springfield troop east when you called for help.”

---

They reached the Visitor’s Barracks as Haskin finished her story. It was one of the barracks buildings that had sustained some extensive damage. They could see the repairs to the central portion of the building. They met Daniel, Dave Whittle of the 10<sup>th</sup> Kansas and Timothy Tobias of the 7<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro Rangers on the porch. After a short inspection tour, they gathered the troopers and headed for the mess hall.

---

The room was decorated with military banners and murals. Most of the tables were already occupied by Missouri troopers who were stationed in the capitol or in training cadres. The din ceased when the Gunnison troops entered as curious glances were directed their way.

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When they were seated with their food, the noise returned to its normal level. As the early arrivals were beginning to leave, a trooper stopped by the table and saluted the Major. “Ma’am,” he said. “There’s going to be a baseball game down to the field at six. We thought them’s might wanta play.” He indicated the table with a sweep of his hand.

---

Major Haskins looked at Zach and he, seeing the nods of the Gunnison troopers, said, "See you there, old son." The Missouri trooper grinned as he rejoined his mess mates.

---

The game was called on account of darkness with the score tied, much to the disgust of the players. "You be here of a Sunday and we'll have a rematch," the Missouri captain said.

---

Reveille was at six and the Gunnison contingent met at the mess hall for breakfast. Daniel whispered an aside to his father out of the hearing of the guides and Major Haskins. "We were restricted to barracks after lights out. There were guards on every floor." Leo nodded and built a cigarette and finished his coffee.

---

"What's the schedule today?" asked Zach. "The boys have been away from home for a long time and are anxious to get back," he added pointedly.

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"Today, at 800 hours, you meet with the Governor at the Mansion, if that is convenient."

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Ishtar Singh looked at his watch. "Thirty minutes," he muttered in a loud whisper to Leo.

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They entered the Mansion and found John Benson in his study. There was a cluster of chairs with small tables beside each one. A larger table, with refreshments, had been set up at one end of the room. The only other occupant was Gabriel.

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Zach introduced his party, including Kyle Wolnic who had known Gabriel when they both served New Jerusalem. Gabriel had not changed. He still wore the leather mask covering his damaged face.

---

John Benson opened the meeting with a short greeting, which Zach acknowledged. He then said, "I'm glad you could meet with me. I know you don't have any reason to like or trust me, but I have a situation here that could have a bearing on Gunnison."

---

"Be patient while I give you a little background." He nodded at Gabriel who stood up and opened a wall easel. On it was tacked a map of Missouri and surrounding states. Benson continued, "You know about the Mahdists and your states, Kansas, Kentucky and Arkansas. Gabriel will point out where Francois Durrant has set up a fiefdom in the northeast. He claims a big chunk of Illinois, but he doesn't have much of a presence there. There's

the Bully Boys of St. Joseph in the northwest. They are a small enclave that is more of an irritant than anything else. We have left them alone because of the other situation.

---

“The kicker in this is in the south. The people down near Branson don’t want to join anyone. It’s not a big deal until they have a bad season. Then they come out of the hills and cause some trouble with us. They know not to mess with Arkansas since they are part of the United States.

---

“I have spoken with Homer Jackman, but without approval from Gunnison, he can’t do a thing. We could take them on by ourselves, but it would be a miserable, long campaign and take my full complement of troops. If I get involved and pull the whole lot of troops from the north, I am more than a little likely to get jumped by the Mahdists and their allies up there. I can tell you that we cannot take on a two-front war.

---

“Same thing if I bounce against the north and cripple them, the south will be undefended. The last couple of years, things have been irritating, but not crucial. Lately, however, the drought has hit the mountains hard and the situation is getting critical. I asked you here to explain the situation and to ask for your help and advice.”

---

At this, Zach knew he was in over his head. He did not have any authority to negotiate with Missouri about helping them fight a war and he saw the advantage if the last pockets of reavers duke it out. “Look, I am not the one you would want to talk to. I am just a simple justice of the peace and horse trader. The best thing to do is talk with someone in Gunnison about any plans you have for a joint military expedition. We usually leave people who aren’t states or allies to solve their own problems.”

---

“You misunderstand me,” returned the governor. “I’m not talking about a joint military operation. We only have fifteen troops of about thirty men each. That includes the older men and boys, the reserve militia. Gabriel figures that would be the minimum needed to spank the hill people hard enough for them to leave us alone or, better still, join us.

---

“What we need are enough troops to patrol the north and keep the Mahdists off our backs.”

---

“That would be up to Gunnison,” reiterated Zach. “It would be a toss-up on whether they would authorize an expedition. The Arkansawyers aren’t



involved and, truth to tell, you aren't our ally. We have troops scattered from Pennsylvania to Florida to the Mississippi. I don't even know what is available. Probably enough to handle this, but I'm not the one to commit any troops or material."

---

Gabriel sat down again. "What would prevent Arkansas or Kansas or Kentucky from sending forces?"

---

Kentucky is not a state, so we have no say over them. As to the others, they would have to get an okay from Gunnison. You have to understand, we don't let any of our states just get involved in a fight on their own. Any one of these little dustups could end up getting everyone sucked in."

---

Benson leaned forward. "But Tennessee sent three expeditions out on their own."

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Leo, having rolled and lit a cigarette, interjected, "Yeah, before they had been accepted into the United States. And don't think that was not considered. And, they sent out exploring parties, not war parties."

---

The governor ran his fingers through his hair. "I'd say we are not asking for a war party, but I know that it could degenerate from patrolling to war pretty easily."

---

He offered refreshments and the meeting broke up soon after. At the door they found Major Haskins and their escort waiting. The governor invited the delegates to stay and rest as long as they wanted.

---

After lunch, the leaders of the expedition met privately and talked it over. They were split on what to do, but decided to use the next couple of days to interview citizens and, hopefully, find out just what the situation was. Leo was convinced that the Missourians were honestly trying to rid themselves of their reaver roots. His argument was the help they had provided without asking anything in return. Ishtar Singh wanted to help only because it promised a fight with the Mahdists or the northern reavers. He encouraged that they start an expedition against the Bully Boys, at least. Dave was on the fence and Zach was opposed. Kyle promised that Kentucky would follow the Gunnison lead, so as not to jeopardize their application for statehood.

---

The next morning, the guards were gone. Penny Haskins told them that this was ordered by John Benson. She told them that they were on their

own and had complete access to anywhere within Missouri. They could draw supplies from the government stores when they were ready to leave.

---

Over the next week, the Rangers scattered out into the countryside to question and study the farmers and townsfolk. Zach and the other leaders interviewed the citizens in Fort Leonard Wood. At the baseball game on the Saturday before they were leaving, Zach invited the governor and Gabriel to meet.

---

After dinner, the meeting was convened in the Governor's Mansion. When the usual small talk was out of the way, Zach held his hand up for attention. "Governor Benson. As I said before, I have no authority to speak for Gunnison. I will admit that they will pay attention to me if I have an opinion..."

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"Which he usually does," interrupted Leo to laughter.

---

"...which is not unheard of, as Leo so aptly put it. We spent the last week doing some investigating around here. What we found, we liked. You have been trying to steer this government towards our vision of what a state should be. We can't assess how open your elections are, but we were given access to your records and have read your state Constitution. The upshot is: I will recommend that we will accept your request to become allies and hold, shall we say, joint military operations in the North."

---

"Allies, huh?" mused Governor Benson. "That would have to pass the legislature, you know. Treaties and all have to be negotiated and pass them before I can sign it. What would that take?"

---

Zach looked at Kyle. "What happened with Tennessee and Kentucky," he continued, "was a formal request to Gunnison to be recognized and a letter requesting talks on a mutual defense treaty. Something simple, presented by your government to ours."

---

"You know, it was a lot easier before we got this bureaucratic monstrosity set up. We used to just hold a town meeting and vote on it."

---

After a general laugh, John Benson continued, "Tomorrow I will call for the legislature to convene and present this to them. We have the same bureaucratic crap here and everyone will want a say, so I don't anticipate any decision until the end of next week. Can you stay that long?"

---

"No," said Leo and Zach simultaneously. They were both aware that

their wives were waiting and this stop had already delayed them.

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“We have been away from home for a long time,” added Leo. “Thanksgiving is coming and we have to detour to Gunnison before we get home as it is. Not that we don’t appreciate the offer, but we have to get the troopers out of here before they turn into alcoholics.”

---

The meeting broke up and John and Gabriel escorted their guests to the door. While they were shaking hands, Zach admitted, “I had you wrong, John. I think we can work together.”

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As Zach descended the front steps, Gabriel observed, “An apology. There may be hope for us yet.”

---

Leo laughed, “When Zach is wrong he is apologetic. Though, when he is right he’s insufferable.”

---

On the way back to their quarters, Ishtar Singh muttered, “I should have left for home after Camp Lejeune. There has been very little excitement, lately.”

---

Zach threw him an exasperated look and promised to recommend that he lead the joint training exercise, if one was organized. The large Sikh brightened immediately, threw his massive arm around Zach and thanked him profusely.

---

Early on Monday, under gray clouds shedding a light rain, they left. They headed west until the Kansas troops broke off and headed northwest at ruins which marked Dodge City. The rain continued as they rode towards Gunnison. They stopped only to rest the horses or gather supplies.

---

Two weeks before Thanksgiving, they reached Pueblo where a small community had been reestablished. Spending the night to sleep in real beds, they continued on the next day, after saying good-by to Ishtar Singh. Gunnison was reached late the second night. There had been a light snow in the mountains, so Leo and Zach rose early the next morning and, over breakfast, they turned the Kentucky delegation over to John Callahan with undue haste. Gathering up the three Mitchell troops, they retraced their steps, reaching I-25 just as a blizzard hit the mountains behind them. As it was, they rode through cold and snow most of the way to the Mound and arrived at Mitchell cold and miserable.

---

Waiting long enough to report to Carl and Vinght Nguyen, the mayor,

Zach and the Appletons requisitioned fresh horses and set out for home. They had radioed ahead to let their families know that they were coming, so it proved no surprise that The Ranch was ablaze with lights and the residents of The Lake were also present. As Cathy put it, "He might just get lost again."

---

In addition to the boys' wives and the Silvers, there were the ten grandchildren. With the Banduccis, Wetherbys, Youngs and Montoyas, there were over fifty people and Sarah despaired at finding enough beds for them all.

---

Most of the older children were excited about camping in the empty lambing barns, thus freeing up their rooms. While setting up the heaters, Zach gave his usual mock-stern warning about going to sleep and not staying up all night 'making mischief'. The adults went to bed early and Zach only had to get up once when the noise became a load roar.

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## Chapter 17

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### Holidays

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*Fall/Winter 2052/2053*

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*Back again. Another year coming to an end. I can't believe that between the two family groups we have over fifty. My kids are sure growing up. William close to a teen-ager and little Amy going on six. It's enough to make me feel old. And Sarah: what a wife. Still looking gooooooooood after all these years. A little gray in her hair is all the sign that she is improving like a great bottle of wine. I remember after every kid she would swear that her figure would never come back, but with each one, it did. No regrets on having made that Rawlins trip, at all.*

---

*The place looks good, too. I don't know what I would have done without Karl and Eduardo and Ed. Now, however, I do solemnly swear to myself that I am retired. Yesterday I told our esteemed mayor that I would not be running for Justice of the Peace again under any circumstances. Period. After all these years, the keep reelecting me over and over again. Nope. This is the last year. After this, I will be sitting on my front porch (or up at The Lake) watching the sun set and my children growing like weeds.*

---

*Of course, that will be up to Sarah. However, I am going to take a little time out once in a while to treat her as she deserves and hasn't been. Picnic, little trips, just the two of us. Maybe a fancy dinner in town. Whatever.*

---

*There have sure been a lot of changes in this old world in the last thirteen years. From a small group of refugees to a thriving community to a new United States. I kind of know how the original founding fathers felt like. Pretty proud, pretty proud.*

---

*Not that there aren't still a few things to iron out. The whole set of states in the Old South. Pennsylvania. Ohio and Indiana. Missouri and the Ozarks. The last of the reavers and the Mahdists are still around. Maybe, we can finish surrounding them with states and starve them on the vine or eliminate them. Of course, a lot of the reavers seem to have settled down and are forming their own territories. And we can't forget the New Englanders. If we hold to our usual attitude, the citizens of those areas will have to make an*

*attempt to free themselves before we get involved. I wonder what the outcome of the boundary decision was and how many more defectors we got.*

---

*Wow. This sounds like I am writing my final memoirs. Enough.*

---

Since the next week was Thanksgiving and it had started to snow, the Applebys decided to stay until after the holiday. The boys went up to The Lake to hunt for turkeys and wild pigs for the big dinner and to take care of the stock. They took their wives along to celebrate a second honeymoon, leaving the children with their grandparents. The women left behind shooed their husbands and fiancés outside to leave them in peace with the other preparations for the feast. With the snow still falling, there were days filled with sledding, skiing, snow ball fights and general good times. The men handled this in shifts in order for Zach, Eduardo and Karl to keep up on any work that needed to be done in order to get things ready for winter, but most of all, to finish the house for Elizabeth and David.

---

When he decided to settle down, David set to with a will to clear and start their home. His plans were ambitious and the house grew from a modest three bedroom to a smaller replica of Zach's house. It had six bedrooms and Lizzy endured a prolonged bout of teasing when this was discovered. The wedding was planned for the twentieth of December, though the two had been warned that the roads may be closed due to snow and their guests unable to arrive. David's troop made week-end trips to ensure that the house was finished on time.

---

Several expeditions were made to town to pick up last minute items and to get the children their winter checkups with the doctor. They were assured that a stronger vaccine was being developed to fight the super plague.

---

Over a radio hookup, Kentucky was accepted for statehood and the delegation returned to Hopkinsville to prepare for the celebration to be held the following May. The request by Missouri to be granted ally status was hotly debated, but was approved with the proviso that a delegation be sent to Branson to parlay with the residents of the Ozarks. The legislature had little desire for another military expedition, even if it was only to free up Missouri troops for the fighting.

---

The boys came down from the mountains in the middle of a blizzard

in time for Thanksgiving. They had managed to bring six turkeys and two young sows with them. The birds and pigs were roasted in the fire pit, which Eduardo had enclosed in a pavilion the previous winter. There were pies, cakes, various kinds of potatoes, greens, stuffing and breads. After dinner, the men were assigned cleanup duties, which they loudly complained about. Sarah Young, five years old and thinking they were serious, stood in the doorway and shook her finger at them, “You know, grandpa. If you don’t cook, you have to clean up. Gamma and mommy have been cooking so you have to clean up.”

---

Zach sank to his haunches and tried not to laugh. He humbly bowed his head and said, seriously, “You are right, Sarah. We won’t complain anymore and we are sorry we did.” Where upon, Sarah threw her arms around him and whispered, “If you need help, I can clear the table for you.”

---

The next day, the wedding planning went into full swing and the males made themselves scarce. David was forbidden to enter the main house while they sewed the wedding dress. The finishing touches were put on the wedding house. When the last of the construction work was done, they took several wagons to town to select furniture from the warehouse. Karl had to slow the couple down as the bill began piling up.

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“Even with the generous presents of time that you two are getting, you are going to end up as indentured servants for life, if you keep going. Slow down a little, unless there is something we need to know, like one of the nurseries has to be furnished?”

---

Lizzy blushed furiously and David just smiled. They ended up with enough baby things for one room. While the wagons started back, Zach and Sarah dropped the invitations off at the Post Office. William Smith had added that function to the Commissary and used a regular relay of troopers to deliver mail and packages to the valley communities. Several sets of boxes had been scavenged from Post Offices and installed in a corner of the complex. Zach began sorting through the stack of envelopes, slotting those that were destined for residents of Mitchell and dropping others into the large boxes for the valleys. Another tub was for locations outside Jefferson. These would be sorted and sent by the next available means.

---

To make good on his promise to himself, he had reserved a suite at

the hotel and he and Sarah spent a peaceful night with each other. After a dinner in the dining room, they visited old friends and luxuriated in being alone. Back in their rooms, a guilty Sarah said, "I feel terrible, but this is great. As much as I love the kids and all, I love this. Am I being a terrible mother?"

---

Zach ran his fingers lightly along her bare spine. "A veritable ogre of a mother. I don't think I can stand to stay with you for more than a century or two." As he began nibbling at her neck, Sarah forgot all about her question.

---

At dinner time the next day, a very relaxed and satisfied couple pulled up to their door. Immediately, an avalanche of bodies poured out the front door and engulfed them. Wiping Hannah's nose, Sarah looked ruefully across at Zach. "Back to the grind," she said and was soon happily immersed in her family again.

---

Christmas and the wedding day approached rapidly. The closer the event came, the more nervous and agitated Lizzy became. Her fussing became such a distraction, Sarah forbade her to even speak of it. She was packed off to The Lake for a visit to the Appleby's, who were her bridesmaids. They selected their dresses and occupied her time until the big day.

---

The weather had turned mild and guests began arriving just after dawn. The celebration was scheduled for noon. Father Tilford oversaw the ceremony, which was held in the largest barn, scrubbed and decorated for the event. Lizzy proudly and loudly recited her vows. She looked lovely and happy. David, on the other hand, was pale and nervous and he could be barely heard when he spoke. The party afterwards was split between the younger invitees and the older.

---

The next day, after a late breakfast, the guests who had stayed the night set out for home. Lizzy and David did not show themselves until late in the day to much ribbing. The twenty-second was devoted to finding and cutting enough Christmas trees for each family. David insisted that he and Lizzy have their own. A soft snow started to fall that afternoon as they began to decorate the trees. The evening of the twenty-fourth, all the families gathered in the main house for dinner and carols.

---

Christmas morning dawned bright and clear. Breakfast was served in the wedding barn and presents exchanged. After lunch, they all bundled up



and began the trip up the mountain to The Lake. Zach commented that the boys had better have done their hunting for the winter because the loud carols and laughter had chased any game into the next state. Sarah observed that if the singing had been on key, the animals would have stayed to hear it. Zach pretended to sulk until he was subjected to another lecture from his granddaughter.

---

They arrived to a huge welcome from their hosts. Hot cider and carefully hoarded chocolate soon warmed the travelers. A canopy had been rigged over the patio between the two L-shaped houses. The fire pit was down to coals. Gregg had rigged a solar powered spit on which turned an elk, three turkeys and a wild boar. Karl had managed to find and keep secret a case of wine which he brought out at the celebration. After dinner, they exchanged gifts and serenaded the surrounding countryside.

---

A second set of L-shaped houses had been built when Adam Silver moved in. Though the three extra suites were unfurnished, with small heaters and cots these provided sufficient sleeping space for the guests. The next day, they spent on the ice which had formed on the lake. Despite Zach's pointed comments, the ice remained firm. The hockey game degenerated into a mob action, as usual. David and Lizzy offered to return home that night to 'watch the animals'.

---

The year ended with another blizzard which kept everyone confined to their homes. Zach spent the time with the inside chores that had piled up and playing with the children. He, Ed, Karl and Eduardo talked over their plans for the following year. They went over the breeding records and decided which animals were to be paired.

---

At end of January, Zach received a letter that started him chuckling. He had been standing in the Commissary while Sarah and Lizzy were picking up a few items that were needed at The Ranch. William glanced over from his desk where he was looking over his books for Zach's totals.

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"What's so funny," he asked.

---

Zach glanced up and walked over leaned his elbows on the counter. He glanced at the letter again before he replied. "Do you remember me telling you about the mysterious rider that had been seen on the Kansas/Oklahoma border? Back when we went to Tennessee for their statehood celebration and

it turned into the rescue operations of their expeditions?"

---

At Williams nod, he continued, "We were pretty paranoid and this rider just fanned the fire. Everyone thought that there was a single entity planning something bad. When we interviewed a Cherokee who had seen him or her, we were more convinced than ever that something was going on."

---

Interested, William joined Zach at the counter. "But there wasn't any conspiracy or anything. The Tennessee expeditions' troubles were unrelated."

---

"Right, that's why we never pursued the rider business. In fact, we pretty much forgot about it." He raised the letter. "John Smith's nephew sent this letter. Said they finally caught the rider, not the original one, but another. Apparently, scared him near to death. He was a trooper from the 10<sup>th</sup> Jefferson Rangers out of Trinidad. He was in the middle of a *race*. One of the training exercises that Jerry Carter had set up was for the rangers to be able to travel from Trinidad to Fort Smith, Arkansas unseen. His counterpart there would give the rider a card to prove he had made it, a fresh mount and supplies. The only rule was that he had to arrive back in Trinidad alive and his mount had to be in good shape.

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"When we questioned the mayor of Shawnee, he gave us a story about swapping mounts and how his was back in the field and the other was gone. The Arkansas Rangers couldn't run it down. Anyway, the thing was; when the Cherokees caught this guy, they questioned him and found out about the whole scheme. Happened that this was a different rider and the other one had had second thoughts about the trade because the horse wouldn't be the one he got in Arkansas and he was afraid he would be disqualified, so he went back and re-swapped the two horses back before beating it back to Trinidad."

---

William looked puzzled. "Why didn't Carl know about this? You'd think that something to do with training would have to go through Defense."

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"You'd think so, wouldn't you? I'll have to radio Jerry and find out the full story."

---

Just then, Carl came in. "Thought I saw your wagon outside, Zach. Hi, Will, watch your stock or this clown will walk off with it.

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"Say, Zach, I got a radio call from Trinidad a couple of days ago. Tried to call you, but the lines were down, I guess. It was from Jerry Carter. Something about a training exercise which had his rangers riding to Fort



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## Chapter 18

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### Missouri

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*Spring 2053*

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*What a great winter. Got Lizzy married off, their house built and a lot of work done around the Ranch. My resignation was accepted and some other poor sucker was elected. For the first time in my post-apocalyptic life, I have no outside responsibilities. I just may take Leo up on his invitations to go fishing! Whenever anyone official even looks like they will ask me to do something, I just say "NO". Time to raise the kids, breed a better horse and laze in the sun. The rest of these pages will be exciting enough to cause a coma.*

---

*As a matter of fact, I am going to take Sarah on a picnic tomorrow and stay away all day. Give our new adoptee, Carrie Stemple, a chance to get to know the "mob". I wonder who SHE is going to marry. Sarah got her and her sister through the adoption agency. Came in a new batch of refugees out of New Africa that we traded arms for. She is definitely NOT a shy, retiring type like Lizzy. I have a feeling that her story would be pretty interesting if we could get her to tell it. Her little sister, who we also have, has some pretty bad nightmares. The kids seem to like her, so if she can tolerate them, we have a new nanny (until she gets married). Which means that we are going to have to build another house. We are going to have to limit the size of any new homes. By the time the kids start getting married, we won't have any pasture left! Karl suggested that we start blasting the mountain and create building lots. I THINK he was joking.*

---

*It is almost time for the troops to gather for the Missouri operation. This time I can sit on the porch with a cup of coffee and a pipe and watch them ride on by.*

---

*As the day for the troops' departure neared, Lizzy became moody and unhappy. She refused to smile and spent most of her time in her own home. David was rarely able to cajole her to join the rest of the settlement for collective activities. He became worried about her and talked to Sarah.*

---

She and the rest of the women at The Ranch tried to find out the problem, but it wasn't until a week before the expedition was scheduled to depart did the girl finally break down. Sarah had to wait out a storm of hysterical crying before she was able to make sense out of the emotional babble.

---

Later, after bringing out a drink and his smoking supplies to Zach, Sarah sat quietly by her husband who had a growing suspicion that something was up. As she sat down on the porch swing and gave him an affectionate kiss, Zach said, "Not that I want to seem suspicious, but the last time you brought me my pipe and slippers, I took a trip to Maryland."

---

"Zach," she said with an innocent smile and theatrically batted eyelids, "can't a girl wait on her man if she wants?"

---

He sat up with a jerk. "No. Whatever the question is, NO. In fact, after this little stunt, tell Lizzy 'NO'. We should not be ruled by her little tantrums."

---

"Okay, Zach, time to get serious," Sarah said, sitting up straight and looking her husband in the eye. "We have spent a lot of time with Elizabeth and she is working herself up into a dangerous state. Yes, I will admit it is just like in Kentucky. Under normal circumstances, I agree with you. We would NOT let our children try to manipulate us like Lizzy is doing."

---

"The problem with this is the baby. Last week I took her in for her checkup. Dr. Barbara is concerned. She has ordered Lizzy to bed and has prescribed bed rest for the duration of the pregnancy. The baby is in danger of miscarrying and any stress could precipitate it."

---

"I know that you have divorced yourself from any activity outside The Ranch and the family and I know how much you wish to, well, retire here. But, Zach," she continued, placing a beseeching hand on his arm, "she is part of this family, too."

---

Zach took a deep breath and calmed down in the face of Sarah's gravity. "All right, what am I going to agree to do?"

---

"Thank you, dear," she answered and curled into his arms and explained.

---

When Leo led his sons and Adam Silver to the ranch early one morning to pick up David, they found Zach packed and ready. When his

friend roared with laughter he just grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

---

“I didn’t think you could just stand by and watch us go off without you,” Leo said.

---

“Hello, Leo,” said Sarah from the porch. “I am the one who is sending him. He will tell you everything on the road. Now, get out of here.” Daniel noticed the sparkle of tears in her eyes.

---

David ran out of his house slapping his hat on his head. He looked guiltily at Zach as he mounted. The little caravan wound its way to the lip of the valley, trailed by a pack of children for a short way. Zach paused and looked back to see Sarah standing with her arm raised. She pressed her fingers against her lips and threw him a kiss. They had said their goodbyes the previous night.

---

He turned his mount down the hill where Leo had held back to wait for him. On the way to town, he told him the whole story. “Well, whatever the reason, it would have been lonely without you. Anyway, we can go through this last little dust up together. This is my last time, too. And Gregg’s. He is to head up the Recruitment team. They are going to set up a regular caravan so the whole family can go. His first move will be to Texas then over through the Deep South and up through Pennsylvania to finish up back in Arkansas. The rest of his team will meet him in Lake Texana when we are done in Missouri. You can imagine, Cathy is not too happy about it. Looks like they will be gone for a year or so.”

---

Zach laughed, “Well, how about you and I making this final expedition as fun as we can.”

---

In a better mood, he rode into town where the rest of the expedition was gathering. The 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson had arrived from Black Valley and the remainder of the 1<sup>st</sup> Rangers was ready and impatient to go. There seemed to be a party air in town. The families of the troopers from Black Valley had accompanied their sons and had been in town for several days.

---

Carl had confined the troops to camp and was overseeing the final packing and inspections. He was bellowing at a hapless trooper who was guilty of some infraction when Zach and Leo rode up. Carl dismissed the man and waved the two into his office.

---

Zach and Leo sat as Carl collapsed into his chair, causing it to creak

alarmingly. Since his fall, Carl had put on considerable weight. The harried Director of Militia – Mitchell, to use his official title, commented to his friends, “Why is everything such a production these days. I swear, a couple of years ago I could have turned out every troop in a few hours. Now, it takes two days to assemble, three days to inspect and issue supplies, forms for fuel, food and,” he picked up a sheet, “underwear, for God’s sake. Why in Heaven can’t troopers provide their own underwear?”

---

Leo laughed so hard he began choking on his cigarette. Zach pounded him on the back until he was waved away by his coughing friend. “Don’t do that. I’ll end up choking to death in your office. What’s the delay? I thought we were late and would have to catch up.”

---

“Aw, don’t listen to me. I’m just crabby because I’m getting fat and old,” Carl replied, slapping at his paunch. “Oh, the troops are ready to go, but I just got word from Gunnison that I am going to have to wait for Doc White and his team to load the mobile lab. They want to get a look first-hand at this new plague and see how the vaccine they developed will stand up to it. That means, at least, one more supply wagon with camp gear and food, which means finding horses, drivers, etc. THEN, I got word from Gunnison that Robert Agnello is back from Pennsylvania and HE is going to take a team out to talk with those yahoos from the Ozarks to keep the peace between two bands of reavers. I say ‘let them just wipe each other out’.”

---

“Robert? Did they say how the negotiations went with the New Englanders?” asked Zach.

---

“Well, we are not going to war. At least, not soon, there were no orders to mount an expedition against Bunker Hill or anything,” grumbled Carl.

---

“So, when do we move out?” queried Leo.

---

“Tomorrow at oh-dark-thirty. The doc will have his wagon loaded and ready, he promised, tonight before dark. I got his supplies loading now and one of the Cunninghams is going along as driver. You know they can only have a special driver so’s not to break a test tube or anything. One of the troopers from the 1<sup>st</sup> is driving the supply wagon.

---

“We meet Agnello at the usual place. He will have the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S., 4<sup>th</sup> Jefferson Rangers with Jerry Carter and 2<sup>nd</sup> Taos. We will meet Ishtar Singh

and the 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro Ranger and 6<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro. Then, if no one gets lost, we head for Kansas to pick up Rafael and the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kansas and the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas Rangers.

---

“When we get to Fort Leonard Wood, if we get there, we should find the 7<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Rangers, 10<sup>th</sup> Kentucky and the 8<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Rangers. Which, with our own 1<sup>st</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson and 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers, will give us fourteen troops to watch the northern border of Missouri while the Missourians, who should be guarding their own damn borders, are down talking to their cousins from the Ozarks.”

---

“Wait a minute. You kept saying ‘we’. Does that mean that you are finally getting off your lazy butt and doing something?” kidded Zach.

---

“If I wasn’t so exhausted from organizing everything so you two bums could take a vacation, I would hit you with something,” snarled Carl in mock-anger, raising his cane.

---

Just then a trooper knocked on the open door. “What!” barked Carl. Then, “sorry, Jack. What is it?”

---

Jack Carson grinned as if he was used to Carl’s attitude. “The doc is here with the wagon. Where do you want ‘em to sit in the formation?”

---

Carl rolled his eyes. “If you put their precious wagon anywhere but the head of the line to minimize the dust, you will have to listen to them complain all the way. Trooper Carson, you have your orders, put them at the head of the line and smile while you do it.”

---

He looked at his two friends, “Let’s go see what other unreasonable demands the good doctor has, shall we? I swear, that old man should retire.”

---

They walked out to find a young woman directing the laboratory into place in the wagon park. She wore a floppy campaign hat, wool shirt and jeans tucked into heavy hiking boots. As they approached, the woman turned and they saw a pleasant face with glasses fronting her dark brown eyes. Her smile was warm as she shook their hands. “Doctor Emily Ferguson. Transferred to the Research Center last week. I’m lead doctor. Thanks for your help. Doc White sent me.”

---

Carl was taken aback by the brusque manner. “Not at all doctor. How is the doctor? Well, I hope.”

---



“He’s fine. Getting too old, my guess.”

---

“Good. I hope you’re comfortable with everything?” Carl asked.

---

“You have gear and food?”

---

“Of course, everything you will need. There is plenty of everything. You will be at the front of the line so there won’t be any problems with dust or whatever.”

---

“Dust? I don’t know how to pack medical equipment?!?” she demanded.

---

Carl held up his hands as if to ward off a blow, “No, no. It’s just that Doc White insisted, well, thought it would be best to minimize the possibility of contamination or whatever,” he finished lamely.

---

Doctor Ferguson cocked her head as if examining an unpleasant specimen, “Doc White is an old woman. Oh, I want to inoculate everyone who is going on this expedition with the new vaccine. ” She turned and walked off without another word.

---

Leo snorted, “That was interesting.”

---

They slept that night at the hotel and were roused by a knock on the door at 3:00 a.m. Bleary-eyed, they accepted the cups of coffee thrust into their hands when they answered the door. “Compliments of the management,” drawled Carl.

---

An hour later, after a quick shower and quicker breakfast, they joined the caravan as it was started towards the Mouth. Other than a constant rain, the trip was uneventful and they found Ishtar Singh and Jerry Carter waiting with their troops.

---

As they drove into camp, the clouds broke enough to cast rays of sunshine on the soggy collection of frame houses. Over the years, a small town had grown on the site, due to its convenient location as a meeting place for trade and a way station on the road between Palo Duro, Mitchell and points East. Only a few of the buildings were occupied year-round. The rest were mere bunkhouses and a cookhouse for transients.

---

The horses were given a day to rest. The grass had been thin and watery, so the grain ration was dipped into. A rider was sent to Seldon to ask Rafael if he could supply more. Meanwhile, a hot meal and showers were

gratefully accepted by the wet and tired troopers from Mitchell.

---

During the night, the clouds broke and the morning dawned clear and bright. The expedition's spirits picked up with the brilliant dawn and growing warmth of the day. When they pulled into Seldon, Rafael was waiting with grain and his troops. The forage was quickly loaded and the train set off after a noon meal.

---

Robert Agnello suggested that the negotiating team forge ahead to start the organizing phase before the troops arrived. Carl sent the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas Rangers and the 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro Rangers as an escort and supplies were packed on spare horses. The next morning they set off and quickly outdistanced the caravan.

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The expedition was met by a contingent of the 10<sup>th</sup> Kansas on the eastern end of Topeka. They were out of Valley Falls. They reported that there had been a minor incursion by reavers, but the area was quiet.

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Rafael invited them to stay and eat, anxious to gather what intelligence he could on the St. Joseph reavers. Larry Knowles spread out a map of the area. He pointed out the location of known reaver camps. The raids into Kansas had slowed dramatically shortly after it became allied with Jefferson. The United States government had posted signs along the de facto border which stated that any incursions would be met with the full forces of the country.

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Rafael ordered that the patrols be stepped up by the 10<sup>th</sup> and the other two troops in the area, the 17<sup>th</sup> stationed in Mound City near the Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge and the 5<sup>th</sup> Rangers out of the Hiawatha area. He cautioned them that if there was fighting in Missouri, the United States troops would try to push the reavers West into their arms rather than let them cross the border into Mahdist territory where they could find refuge.

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They left the next morning and were met by Missouri horsemen, the Clinton Cavalry, when they reached the border. The young lieutenant, Tom Gray, saluted and escorted them to Clinton.

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Once there, they met with Captain Massey. He had just returned from a patrol and had a running fight with a group of reavers. When Ishtar Singh asked why Missouri did not just crush them, the captain replied, "Our problem is, we fight the Bully Boys and Durrant is on our backs and vice versa. We go

against both of them and the Caliphate will jump us. There just aren't enough troops to go around. Of course, the same is true of them; they start fighting each other and we clean up the leftovers."

---

Leo stubbed out his cigarette and commented, "And that is why you are thinking about becoming a state."

---

The young lieutenant flushed. "A lot of us think it would be a good idea no matter what!" he snapped.

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"No offense, son. We did the same thing with the Sioux and the Mormons when we were starting out," interjected Zach. "We wanted to ally ourselves with whoever was around to leave us free to fight the Mahdists when they came."

---

Rafael knocked on the table to bring their attention to the situation at hand. "What does your patrol area cover, anyway, Captain?"

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At a signal from Massey, Lieutenant Gray bent over the map and indicated the town of Harrisonville. "Our line of patrol is from just west of here, through Higginsville, Marshall, Macon to around Hannibal. Then south along the river to Tennessee/Kentucky. We used to send sweeps through southern Illinois, which is almost empty. The Kentucky boys do the same, but neither of us has any settlers in the area. It has been so raided over by Durrant or the Mahdists that the survivors moved out. We got some and Kentucky got some."

---

Drinks were brought and, while they were being distributed, Zach lit his pipe and asked, "How many troops do you have on patrol? You have a pretty large area to watch."

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"We normally have eight, but with the trouble in the south, we only have three, at present. We hoped you would arrive before the reavers or the Mahdists realize how thinly stretched we are."

---

Carl spoke up. "We have eleven troops with us and there are supposed to be three more from Tennessee and Kentucky at Fort Leonard Wood. However, two troops will accompany our medical team to Kentucky and the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. will go with Robert Agnello to the Ozark Conference."

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"But, I think eleven troops, plus whatever you have will be sufficient."  
"

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“Eleven!” Lieutenant Gray broke in. He had been sitting in his chair fuming, “That’s not enough for to go after anyone, sir.”

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“Whoa, son,” said Robert. “We are not here to start a war. Our job is to relieve some Missouri troops for whatever happens in the south, do a little joint exercises and training. We are currently on a live-and-let-live stance with the reavers and the Mahdists. If they leave us and our allies alone, we leave them alone.”

---

The lieutenant sprang angrily to his feet. “Then, just what good are you?”

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“Lieutenant!” roared Massey. “Please, make a round of the sentries and then you may retire.”

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When Gray had stalked stiffly out of the tent, Captain Massey said, “I apologize for his actions. His family was recently killed in a Bully Boys raid and he is very anxious to get back at them.”

---

“No need to apologize,” interjected Dr. Ferguson. “Quite understandable.” She rose and said, “Good night.” Her departure signaled the breakup of the meeting and they left to get some sleep before moving out in the morning.

---

During breakfast, Carl turned over command of the eight troops that were to start their familiarization with the northern border to Ishtar Singh. Jerry Carter, who was to be his second in command, was asked not to let the Indian start a war, only half jokingly. The remaining six troops and the medical team with the rest of the expedition leadership joined Captain Massey and his troop for the journey to Fort Leonard Wood. The Clinton Scouts would orient the United States troops.

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Governor Benson got right down to business. “Sorry, we have to forego ceremonies, but there was another raid last night by Monett. We had a lot of livestock stolen and some buildings burned. Luckily, no one was killed.”

---

Robert held up his hand and asked, “Weren’t there any herders or anyone occupying the buildings?”

---

The governor looked up from the map and replied, “Yeah. They were tied up and left.”

---

“Then it seems to me, this was not an attack, but an old fashioned cattle raid with an emphasis on NOT causing casualties. The Ozarkers were not out after scalps, but food. I bet the buildings were set on fire to keep the pursuit occupied fighting them not chasing the raiders.”

---

“It doesn’t matter, Mr. Agnello, why the buildings were fired or what their motives were,” snapped Benson. “What matters was that we were raided and our stock, which we will need for the next winter and to build our herds, was stolen.”

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“Just an observation,” returned Robert, mildly.

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The governor apologized for his outburst. He admitted that there had been little loss of life on the raids, but they were disruptive to their efforts to establish an independent economy.

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“Have you gotten anywhere with setting up negotiations?” asked Robert.

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“I thought we had. Before last night’s raid, we managed to arrange a meeting between them, us and you. They weren’t too happy about our tying in with you. It was set to take place in three days at the Ozark Jr. High School off US65 in Ozark.”

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Before anyone had time to say anything more, Dr. Ferguson broke in. “Now that that’s settled. When do we leave for Kentucky?”

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Governor Benson answered, “Doctor, you may leave any time you would like. We can resupply you for the trip and Max, here, will escort you with his two troops to wherever you would like.”

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“To a spot where we can find a victim of this new plague,” she stated.

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Max looked like he was about to bow and tug his forelock in subservience to her. Carl chuckled and remembered how she had made him feel like a recalcitrant schoolboy. “Yes, ma’am,” Max said. “Up by Vincennes, they been tryin’ to come across the river, ma’am.”

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“Tomorrow. At dawn. That’s when we leave.” With that, the doctor rose and left the room.

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Leo looked at Max. “Have fun, Max. My advice if you want to keep the skin on your butt from being chewed off, don’t cross her more than you have to.”

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Trescott wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “Whew. Is she always like this?”

---

He never got his answer. A sharp voice floated into the room from the front hall, “Mr. Trescott. Please.” Max slammed his hat on his head and, with a harried look on his face, hurried from the room.

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After the Kentuckian had made his hasty withdrawal, Robert continued his train of thought. “I say we make the meeting as scheduled. We don’t have any idea about the makeup of the Ozark leadership. There may be factions who want to scuttle this peace effort.”

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The governor grudgingly agreed and suggested that they make a start the next morning. Zach, Leo, Baxter Ashe, the 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson, 4<sup>th</sup> Jefferson and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kansas resupplied and left in the late afternoon for Clinton. Carl and Rafael would remain at the capitol to act as liaisons with the Missouri government and the widely separated United States units.

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### The Bully Boys' Demise

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*Spring/Summer 2053*

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*Well, back on campaign. That didn't last long. I wish I could tell David that we are too crowded at the Ranch and he and Lizzy need to find another place. Yeah, like that would ever happen. The only thing that would accomplish would be to drive Karl and Henrietta away. Got to do something about these Lizzy-tantrums. At least now I have nothing to do except wander around the Missouri countryside until the doctor and Bob Agnello are done and we can get David back home. I bet Lizzy is going to be a miserable little nag. Hopefully, I am just being unkind.*

---

*Tomorrow we should get to Clinton. Leo has a case of the nerves, seems he has a premonition that something is happening with the boys. I hope I am not that nervous when my boys (and girls) are old enough to enlist. Yeah, right. I'll probably be worse.*

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By the time Clinton had been reached, Ishtar Singh had revamped the patrol schedule and moved the line further north. Squads of rangers were sent deep into reaver territory to discover any raiding parties. Several had already been intercepted and destroyed.

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The 8<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Rangers, 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Taos had been assigned the east end of the patrol area. Carl was concerned that the medical party would be exposed to raids by the Durrant reavers or the Mahdists. He had ordered the three units, able to move fast, in the area as backup. They had an additional job to watch the Durrant reavers at Hannibal for signs of a large-scale raid.

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Ishtar Singh had stationed his troops from the 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson at Platte City to the 6<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro at Kearney, the Springfield at Carrollton, the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas at Macon, the Columbia at Shelby State Park, anchored with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kansas at Hannibal. The 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Taos were held there in reserve.

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The Rangers had been assigned north of that line. The 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro

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set up their headquarters in the Smithville Lake Wildlife Area. Further east was the Bonanza Conservation Area where the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson made their base. The 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas took over the abandoned buildings in the Swan Lake Reserve. They were on the boundary between the Bully Boys and Durrant. The 8<sup>th</sup> Tennessee were stationed at the Deer Ridge Conservation Area. The 4<sup>th</sup> Jefferson patrolled north along the Mississippi from Hannibal.

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Zach and Leo joined Ishtar at his camp in Kearney. After the latest clash with the reavers from St. Joseph, the frontier settled down. Ishtar Singh was becoming impatient with the inactivity. "It was my thought," he grumbled on morning, "that the reavers would come through here. I left a fine hole for them, but they are too stupid to fall into my trap. Zach and Leo, my dear friends, you must ask Carl if we can take one small step to the north. Just enough to excite them into activity. I am very bored here, if you must know."

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Zach smiled. "Relax, you old warhorse. Didn't you have enough excitement last time? You almost lost a leg, if I recall."

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"Zach, you tell the joke. That was the mildest of scratches. Hardly worth mentioning to my Siri. But, please, call Carl before I turn to stone and am left here as a perch for rude birds."

---

The banter continued through the meal, but, as they rose to finish their coffee on the front porch, a rider galloped up and slid to a stop at the stairs. The trooper leapt from his mount and raced up the steps and handed a dispatch to Ishtar Singh.

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"Radio was out," he said. "Lieutenant Tobias sent me with this."

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A wide smile spread across the Sikh's face. "Just in time," he roared. Turning to the sentry, he ordered, "Call out the troop. Send a call to 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson, Springfield troop and 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers. Oh, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas. They are coming to visit. Go. Go."

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Leo grabbed the message and read aloud, "BB gang coming. 100 plus. Down 169. Assume heading for Kearney."

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Zach gave Leo a look. "Ishtar, even with everybody, we will be a close match for them. What happens if we take a lot of casualties, even if we win. From what I understand, this is about the whole gang." They were afraid his desire for a fight would outweigh his caution.

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"Oh, do not worry, my friends. We have a plan. Come see." He led



them back to the office where he laid out detailed maps of the area. “See. If they come down the west side of the lake, we have plans at Crow Creek where the culvert has been washed away. It is a wonderful place for an ambush. Trees all around. We have cleared the brush from the creek bed, also.”

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“If they are so unwise as to come down Interstate 35, when they reach Mack Porter Park, they will find the bridge across Clear Creek falling from under them. Very many explosives are hidden. When they are disorganized, we kill them all.”

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The worst choice for us is south from Plattsburg. Very bad, well, not so very. We will have to wait until they are in camp and then we will strike like the cobra. Just as you did in Louisiana, as you told me.

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“We will have you as a sniper, shoot all the sentries, swoop in, kill them all. Very simple, yes!”

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Later, after Ishtar Singh left to organize his troop, Leo looked at Zach. “Swoop in, kill them all”? That sounds just like an Ishtar plan.”

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Zach shrugged and they left to check their weapons.

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An hour later, Ishtar entered their quarters waving a piece of paper. “Oh, it is so fine. They are coming down the east side of the lake, along I-35. We will greet them at Clear Creek. I have informed the others with the, oh, so secret signal and they will be meeting us there.”

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The plan had been set in the early days of the deployment. The 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro Rangers would shadow the reavers. The 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson would hurry as fast as they were able and join the 6<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro, 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas and the Springfield troops. A pair of trucks had been involved in a pile-up in the southbound lanes, causing them to be completely blocked. Ishtar Singh, with the 6<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro would take up positions in the wrecks and the short walls flanking the bridge with a clear field of fire. The Springfield would hide on the east side of the freeway among the trees and in the creek bed. The 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson would remain undercover well back from the road to form the cork at the southern end of the ambush. The two ranger detachments would take flanking positions and block the reavers from retreating east or west. The 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas, like the 9<sup>th</sup>, would stay well back and form the cork to the north. There was no high ground, so Zach and Leo would be on an old billboard on the west side of the highway. They knocked shooting ports in the deteriorating

video panels. They were to concentrate their fire on any identifiable leaders.

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“That means anyone waving an arm,” said Leo sarcastically.

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The next morning, the Springfield troop arrived in Kearney and soon after, the 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson. After changing to fresh mounts, the three troops set out. When they drew near Mack Porter Park, they began a more cautious advance, not knowing the reavers exact location. As they closed in on Clear Creek, a ranger from the 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro intercepted them.

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“They are a day or two away,” he reported. “They do not have a consistent rate of travel, so it is hard to say.”

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The large Sikh grinned like a schoolboy about to pull a prank. “Very fine, my son, very fine. Now, run along and tell Lieutenant Tobias to bring my children to me. We will set the table while we wait.”

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When the ranger had disappeared, Ishtar Sing began issuing orders that deployed his troops. Zach and Leo went to the billboard and began to set their position. They made quick work enlarging existing holes caused by years of target practice by passing groups or individuals. The only problem was cracking the screens and shattering the whole panel. Fortunately, they were able to gently enlarge the existing holes. They brought branches and tried to set them naturally to cover the space between the sign and the walkway to hide their legs.

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Leo snorted as he looked over their preparations, “You know, this stuff won’t stop a BB. I say we get off three shots apiece and get out of the way.” Zach agreed and set about clearing the ground below of debris.

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The two snipers set up behind the sign. With silencers attached, they each fired three test rounds into an old box one of the troopers had found by the side of the road. When they were done, the trooper tossed the box into the creek and scuffed the marks left by the shots.

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“Now, we wait,” commented Leo, turning around to lean against the billboard and covering his eyes with his hat. He was soon asleep, snoring gently, his ankles crossed and his fingers laced over his stomach.

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Zach checked his pockets to make sure that his spare clips had not fallen out since he had last checked them. He had already wiped each shell and reloaded the magazines. Standing for a stretch, he used his binoculars to study the terrain. He had to admit that the ambush site, though not perfect,

should trap the reavers. The initial explosion would likely take care of a good portion of them. If they could open fire before the stunned survivors could recover, they could take care of a lot more. The rest would dive for cover in the only location offering it; the creek bed or high-tail it north or south, depending on which side of the bridge they were trapped. The rangers and the 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson should be able to handle those survivors. The Springfield and the 6<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro would have any that took shelter in the creek in a cross-fire.

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The only thought that troubled him was how alert the reavers would be. In the years since he had led the small band to Mitchell, the careless had died and the rest had gotten more cautious. It was pretty easy during the early years to trap an enemy.

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The ambush was loose enough to allow for a normal flank and point formation, but if they had wide flankers, the ranger troops were in danger of being discovered.

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The 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro came in after dark, reported to Ishtar and joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson. The reavers were camped a couple of hours out and would break camp at dawn as usual and be at Crow Creek by 11:00 a.m. The 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson was in position and ready to move up.

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Leo and Zach woke at false dawn and headed down to the creek to wash up and get fresh water in their canteens. They shared a cold breakfast of biscuits and jerky with the rangers and returned to their posts.

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The hours dragged and Leo observed, "Twelve hours of boredom for twenty minutes of action."

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"Just like always," returned Zach. "I would much rather march out and meet the enemy than wait for them. Never had much patience for sitting around."

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At that moment a whistle sounded and a ranger appeared from the west. Hidden from the reavers by a grove of trees, he waved to indicate the reavers were coming. Zach fired a silenced shot that hit a tree behind where the 6<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro was waiting. The Springfield troop would advance when it heard shots.

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Fifteen minutes later, the four-man point rode down the road. The reavers were alert and scanned the brush and trees on either side. They crossed the bridge with only a cursory glance at the wrecks. They had

apparently been this way often before and looked on the rusting heap of metal as part of the scenery. After they had crossed the overpass, one of the stood in his stirrups and waved his hat. Immediately, Zach saw movement down the road and two groups of reavers appeared. Three wagons were sandwiched between them. The point moved on and spread out across the road keeping a prescribed distance in front of the main body.

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Zach was a little concerned. The distance between the point and body of reavers was far greater than he imagined, but he shrugged it off and decided that the 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson would just have to handle it. He shook Leo awake. They and their spotters took their positions and waited.

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As the wagons reached the center of the overpass, an explosion shook the air. The vehicles collapsed into the creek along with a dozen riders. Zach and Leo immediately opened up on the leader trying to rally his men at the south end of the collapsed bridge. As agreed, each fired three carefully aimed shots and dropped five of the reavers. They leapt to the ground and scrambled for the woods where they took up positions and began firing again.

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A volley from Ishtar's hidden troops cut down a dozen or more. Several reavers dropped into the creek bed and were immediately killed by the Springfield troopers who had moved up at the first sound of gunfire. One of the reavers spurred his horse south to escape and that signaled a general attempt by the survivors to run rather than fight. The troopers at the bridge sent them on their way with a volley of shots.

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Suddenly, from north and south, there was a fusillade of firing and the retreating reavers were thrown into confusion and cut-down without mercy. No prisoners were taken except those who were too wounded to fight. Before Zach, Leo or Ishtar Singh were aware of what was happening, these six were immediately taken by the Springfield troop and hung in the woods along the road.

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They salvaged what supplies, weapons and horses they could and put any animals too severely wounded out of their misery. The 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson, 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas and the two scout troops arrived with their loot and one prisoner. He had been wounded on the first volley and knocked unconscious.

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Keeping the Missouri troopers at bay, Ishtar started to interrogate him while Zach and Leo took count of their own casualties. The 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson had

two wounded, the 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro Rangers lost one, the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas had one killed and three wounded and the Springfield troop suffered two killed and three wounded. The 6<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro and the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers were unscathed. They had recovered eighty-two mounts, a large supply of weapons and ammunition and a wagon's worth of usable supplies.

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Zach left the troopers to improvise packs, load the spare animals and bury the dead. He joined Ishtar Singh just as he turned the wildly protesting reaver over to the Missouri troopers. The big Sikh waved the troop leaders, Zach and Leo to a conference.

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"A little rough for him, isn't it?" commented Leo.

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Daniel replied, "At least Doc White isn't here to protest." Zach cleared his throat at the old reference to the incident when Zach had killed the three Mahdists west of Sidney, NE

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"Our friend," he said waving in the direction the reaver had been dragged, "was very helpful. This was a large raid to capture anyone they could. They were going to spread out at Kearney and sweep up everything they could in a rapid movement north. After the raid, they were to run for the Caliphate and locate within their territory. Their women, children and ten or so guards are already on their way. They will set up camp and wait just over the border."

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"Did he give any reason why?" asked Kit Kassel.

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"Oh yes," was the answer. "Our colleagues from Kansas and our new friends from Missouri were causing them so much trouble. And now that we are allies and they are thinking of becoming a state, they had decided that the temperature was too hot for them. This raid was to find young men and women to sell to the Mahdists or gift to them, he was a little vague as to that point. This party was the remains of the two hundred and fifty they once counted.

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"And now they count only the ten guards with the women and children. We should reunite them as soon as possible, hey?"

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Zach laughed. "I suppose you know where this camp will be?"

---

Ishtar bright, white teeth showed through his black-dyed beard. "Ah, most certainly. It is north of the town of Bedford at the Lake of Three Fires. The Lake Binder Park has been the rendezvous for trade between the

Mahdists and Bully Boys for many years. There are still some buildings in some shape to live in, according to our once talkative friend.”

---

Leo spread out a map and traced the route they would need to take to reach the lake. “We can work our way up to US169, then over here we switch to US36 and cut up State Highway E. I figure it a little over a hundred miles, call it one-twenty. We send the Rangers, all of them, as fast as possible to scout the area for other reavers or Mahdists. Let them take spare mounts so they can switch. If this is a regular trading station, there will undoubtedly be some permanent residences, probably a garrison to guard the border.

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“The rest would follow. Except for a squad to take the supplies back to Kearney and report this little dustup to Fort Leonard Wood.” He finished with a tap of a knuckle on Bradford, Iowa.

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“That is a fine plan, my friend,” Ishtar beamed. He ordered the ranger captains to get their troops ready to leave as soon as they had eaten, resupplied and chosen their spare mounts. The second squad of the 6<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro drew the short straw and were assigned the escort duty for the supplies and wounded. The Rangers set off immediately under Leo’s command. They were to observe and reconnoiter only.

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The next morning, the rest of the troops cleaned up the camp and headed north in the path of the rangers. They turned on the receiving gear in case there was a message stone left along the way. Several days later, they met a trooper from Leo. He reported, “The Bully Boy camp is set up at the trading post. There are thirty-some traders and hangers-on at the camp besides the ten men escorting the women. Looking at the women, I would say that we can’t leave them out of the picture, either.”

---

The trooper led them to the rangers’ camp on the west side of the lake. They passed through a picket line of scouts before they entered the camp. It had been set up a half mile from the lakeshore along a creek. They were invisible from the Mahdist camp and the cooking fires were small and built under the trees so the smoke would be dissipated.

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Leo met them and gave them an in depth report of the layout. “Around two a.m., they have the last change of guard before dawn,” finished Jason. “Those guards are alert for three or four minutes before settling down to take a nap. They even have foam mattresses. It shouldn’t be too much

trouble to wrap them up. From what I have seen, the Mahdist troopers are all young and have little or no discipline. There is absolutely no worry about an attack.”

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Ishtar asked, disappointed, “So there will be little fighting?”

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Leo laughed. “Well, you could march in there on your own and beat them all into submission while the rest of us watched.”

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“No, my friend. I am too ancient to do such things. In my youth, I would manage it, but now that I am old, it is useless to even think of it. But, if you would come to hold me up, we would have a fine time of it.”

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Zach interjected, “I’m not putting my boys at risk just so you can be a glory hound, Ishtar. The plan we have worked out will see us taking the whole kit ‘n’ caboodle without a shot being fired. I hope.”

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Ishtar feigned a sigh of sadness. “I suppose it would be better not to startle the wildlife.”

---

Leo and Jerry had scouted a safe route around the lake. Their plan saw a cordon of troops to pin them against the lake while the rangers moved in an hour before false dawn and infiltrated the camp. The 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson would take the guards and join the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas when they moved in on the buildings. They would enter and capture the Mahdists as they slept. Meanwhile, the 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson would surround the Bully Boy camp and move in to take the remaining escort and keep an eye on the women and children.

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“That’s pretty elaborate,” Zach observed. “What happens if something goes wrong?”

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“Then you become the cavalry and Ishtar Singh gets his fight,” answered Leo. “But I don’t think there will be any trouble. Like I said, the guards will probably be asleep, the Mahdists all sleep in one building and the camp escort usually beds down a little ways from the rest. And they have tents for their, shall we say, nocturnal activities.”

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“All right,” Zach shrugged. “You guys planned it, you guys can carry it out. Question is when?”

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“Tomorrow morning,” said Leo. “No time like the present. We will send out the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson a little before dark and they will meet up with the scouts that are watching the camp to let them know and to make sure that

nothing has changed. We meet them, they lead you to positions, we go in. Done.”

---

Zach looked askance at Leo, “You are going in?”

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“Only rhetorically, Zach, only rhetorically. I will be your personal guide. Let the kids do their thing.”

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At three o’clock the next morning the pieces had all been placed and the first stage of the operation was put into action. Daniel led the first squad of 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers from the left and Jason led the second squad from the right. They collected the guards as they slept. There was one slight struggle, but the noise failed to wake any of the camps.

---

The prisoners were brought to the troopers surrounding the camp where they were moved to the rear, trussed up and left with three troopers. Daniel signaled with the soft sound of an owl and led the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers to support their counterparts from Palo Duro. Meanwhile, the 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson snuck silently up and captured the escort and secured the camp.

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The 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas surrounded the barracks while the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson searched the other buildings. When Gregg signaled the all clear, Casey Brothers’ troops moved in. There was a burst of firing, then a tense silence until the lieutenant stepped out and waved the all clear.

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As Ishtar led his troopers in, there was a single shot from the Bully Boy camp. A trooper called out that everything was alright. They reported later that one of the women drew a pistol, but that a shot into the air over her head made her see the error of her ways.

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Peter Burrows of the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas marched the prisoners out the barracks and reported, “We got in okay and got most of the weapons and were pretty much done with securing the barracks when an officer appeared at the end from separate quarters. Georgie shot him in the leg and the guy that had sat up in t’other bed surrendered peacefully.”

---

There were a total of twenty-seven Mahdists and the eight reavers prisoners, along with forty-two women and thirty-eight children. Jerry, Leo and Zach interrogated the women. Most of them had been kidnapped, but seven were turned in as working with the reavers and guarding them. They told a tale of how the pregnant and sick were killed before the rest were moved to Iowa. The thirty-six and the children were loaded into wagons or on



horses and moved south to Bedford with the 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson as escorts.

---

The rest of the prisoners were put to stripping the trading post of all usable supplies and loading them into the remaining wagons. The reaver prisoners were hung by the Springfield troop. The sight was distasteful to Zach and he thought he was getting too mellow for this anymore. There were no prisons and letting them go would only be putting enemies in a position to fight again.

---

The Mahdists were incarcerated at the Bedford jail. This was a temporary arrangement until they had instructions from the capitol. Leo was not anxious to free them until they had defenses built, the civilians out of the way and reinforcements, if they were to hold the territory they had gained.

---

A screen of scouts were thrown out to the north and the leaders met in Bedford in the city park where they camped. A young cow had been shot from a small herd they found and Ishtar called a meeting of the leaders at the main pavilion while it was cooking.

---

“We have taken in a large territory, my friends,” he rumbled. “I am afraid we are spread very thin. I do hate to give up our hard-won land, but I am afraid that we too exposed. I tried the radio and cannot get through to anyone.” He pointed to the map that was laid out on an improvised table. “We are like sitting ducks ready for the plucking. If the Mahdists should decide to come visiting, we would be easily surrounded. I would not like to try to retreat with wagons of women and supplies and a herd of horses. Tomorrow, we move south to reorganize the lines, maybe a little in line with St. Joseph.” The large Sikh looked despondently at the map.

---

Zach knocked the dottle out of his pipe. “Pete, how soon can you contact any of the Kansas units on the border? I’m talking at a horse-killing pace.”

---

The young man thought a moment. “From here. A couple of days, riding day and night. Three mounts per man and stuff to eat in the saddle. Drop the horses as they tire and we switch. Two, two-and-a-half days.”

---

“Yes, yes,” interrupted Ishtar. “Choose another and the fastest horses. Leave now and ride like the very wind. Gather any troops and move them this way to a line, let us see..., along Highway 2 from Nebraska City. Chandar Singh, you will send two troopers south. One to the Columbia unit. Tell them

to move north with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kansas and form a line along the territory claimed by Durrant. Also, have them send a message to Leonard Woods, which I will write. Send the other to the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas Rangers and have them keep a very skinned eye to the north and east both. They will send a runner to the 4<sup>th</sup> Jefferson Rangers and have Mr. Carter keep a close watch on Durrant, in order to prevent a strike by them. They will send another runner to the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson and 2<sup>nd</sup> Taos to move northwest and cover the southern border of the reavers. Hurry, hurry.”

---

The Kansas riders left as soon as they had selected their mounts and been provisioned. Chandar Singh’s two troopers left an hour later, each with a copy of Ishtar’s letter. Leo and Zach organized the remaining troopers. As they were ordering the placement of two captured machine guns, one of the women approached them.

---

“Excuse me, sir?” she said in a tentative manner.

---

“What!” snapped Zach as he pointed to a small pine tree that was obstructing the view up the road. “Cut that one down, too.” He spun to the startled women and glared.

---

“I just wanted to, to...” she hesitated at the look on his sweating face.

---

“Look, I’ve got a lot of work to do, so...” he said impatiently, looking a question.

---

The woman swallowed and said, “You have us leaving this afternoon and...”

---

Zach swept a sleeve across his brow and replaced his hat. “Don’t worry. You have plenty of time to get packed up and out of here before there could be any possibility of an attack.” He made shooing motions and continued, “Just go get packed or loaded or whatever.” He turned his back on her and shouted to the trooper who had just finished cutting the tree. “Get that up here and shove it in front of the machine gun.”

---

Zach spun around to look for Leo and bumped into the woman. “I thought you were gone,” he said with asperity. “Go on.”

---

He started to step around her and she stepped into his path, causing him to halt and, finally, give her his undivided attention. “Okay, what’s up, ma’am.” He stood there with his hands on his hips and his lips pursed tightly.

---

“My name is Naomi Woodson. The other ladies and I wanted to thank you and...”

---

“You’re welcome. Now, gather up the other women and kids and clear out, will you?” Again he started to step around her, but found the tall, young woman standing in front of him, again.

---

“Will you be quiet for a minute, please,” she insisted. “Just listen for a minute! You are going to need some help if we are attacked. Several of us are, well, nurses of a sort. One is an actual one and she taught us some things. A few have offered to cook, clean, take care of the camp and such.” She raised her chin and stated, “And some of us can shoot, too.”

---

Leo walked up as Naomi finished. He looked curiously on. By Zach’s body language, his friend was obviously in an argument with the tall, well-built woman facing him. “What’s up?” he interrupted.

---

“Hi, Leo. Looks like we have a few Amazons who want a crack at the Mahdists and a volunteer nursing corps and a K-P staff.” He turned to the woman. “And what about the children? You want them in the middle of a war zone? Huh?”

---

She very deliberately turned her attention to Leo. “Several of us have volunteered to help.” She proceeded to repeat herself, ignoring Zach who rolled his eyes and shook his head.

---

Leo tried to hide his amusement as he replied, “Well, now, I would be more than happy to recruit you, but the decision would have to be made by the rather large, loud, bearded man in the turban who is standing by the road. Why don’t you go over and see him. In fact, I would be more than happy to escort you and leave this rather crass man to go about his duties.” With that he offered Naomi his arm and they walked off. Leo winked at Zach as he passed him.

---

Zach snorted and shouted for a trooper’s attention. When the man trotted over, Zach ordered him to ride to Bedford and get the women and children who were being evacuated to the capitol to loaded up and moving. “I doubt that you will need more than a squad of the 9<sup>th</sup> to go with them. Tell the other squad to help the rest of the ladies set up their hospital and kitchen. Oh, and arm any who want them,” he finished.

---

As Zach walked away he muttered, “Ishtar would never turn down

those big brown eyes.”

---

Several days passed and Zach had to admit that the cooking was good and it was nice to have the women around. It freed the troopers for patrol and sentry duty while they waited for reinforcements.

---

Bethea Price, the R.N., organized the medical team at the new hospital that had been finished the year before The Troubles. The buildings had been ransacked and vandalized, but not burned and the Intensive Care wing was cleaned and put in order. Their stock of medicines was scanty, even augmented by a careful house-by-house search for anything remotely usable. Bedding was found in homes and stores, cleaned and stored. Tom Seiler managed to rig an array of solar collectors on the roof and lights in the operating and recovery rooms.

---

Naomi took charge of the field kitchen and laundry which were set up in a house by the city part at State and Grant. Again, Tom worked his magic and set up collectors and got the stoves and washing machines hooked up. The captured food stores were augmented by hunting. There were wild cattle and deer in abundance. Scattered, overgrown truck gardens provided early vegetables.

---

Ishtar met with Zach and Leo at the end of the week. “This is worrisome, my friends. Where are they?”

---

“Who? Theirs or ours?” asked Leo.

---

The big Sikh shook his head. “Both, oh yes. Both. The boys we sent to Kansas should have returned by now. The boys we sent to Jerry Carter. Yes, even the escort for the women from the reavers. Where are any of them? It is very worrisome not to know.”

---

Zach lit the last of his tobacco and observed, “My biggest concern is the Mahdists. If our guys are delayed, they are delayed. As long as the Mahdists don’t show up on our doorstep, it really doesn’t matter. But, if the Mahdists do show up, then we are in a lot of trouble.”

---

“Yeah, well, we are about as ready as we can be,” said Leo. “We have a hundred and fifty troopers, more or less. You had them trim the branches off that tree and raise the flag. That ought to make them think twice. If we ever get interested enough, we can pretty much bury the Caliphate. They know it.”

---

Ishtar Singh got out of his chair and dropped his dishes in the slop

bucket. “Yes, I know all of that. But, where are the troopers. Where are they?” he muttered as he walked off.

---

“He just needs a good fight,” observed Zach. “A few shots and he will be his old self again.”

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Leo stretched out his legs. “Remind me tomorrow and I’ll stand outside his tent and fire a couple. I have never seen him this nervous before.”

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## Chapter 20

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### Showdown

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*Spring/Summer 2053*

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*One more band of reavers gone. Don't blame the Missourians for hanging them. They have been in a guerilla war with them for a long time. Atrocities and retaliation. .*

---

*The Mahdists are starting to make some noise and I don't really blame them. It must be pretty boring sitting in a cell all day. We don't have the manpower to let them have any kind of freedom, so there they sit.*

---

*Naomi and Bethea have things organized in Bedford. A few more days and they will have Seiler connecting street lights.*

---

*I just wonder how much longer before the Mahdists realize that their little trading post has met some trouble. I imagine that there will be a supply train some time soon. We capture that and we have more supplies, but then they will know. Then the fat is in the fire, as my grandma used to say. Now that they have worked out a truce with the New Africans, they will have more troops available to answer us. The question will be, do they really want to take us on or will they rattle a few sabers and back off. My guess is: back off. But before or after they wipe us out. They know that we don't want a war, either. Will this be the assassination of crown-prince Ferdinand, which precipitated WWI or Hitler's move into the Ruhr when the French backed off?*

---

*I don't want to criticize Ishtar Singh, but retreat might have been the better part of valor, or something like that. Of course, I kept my mouth shut about it when he asked for opinions.*

---

The dawn broke bright and clear, with high clouds in the western sky. Just after breakfast, a rider galloped up and slide to a halt at the trading post. He was rushed into report to Leo who was in charge for the day. Balu Singh saluted and said, "They are coming, Leo. Chandar Singh spotted a column of troops with the green flag at dawn. He calculates there are about two hundred, but the light was behind them and it was difficult to tell."

---

Leo turned to the crowd of troopers that had collected at the door. "Baker, ride to Bedford and let them know."

---

He instructed the Palo Duro Ranger to get back and tell Chandar Singh that there was to be no contact with the enemy. He was to keep an eye on them, but avoid a fight, even if it meant running. He ordered Daniel to get the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers out to make sure that there was no second or third column out there.

---

Miles Baker arrived at the command tent in Bedford a few minutes after another rider. He crowded into the tent and interrupted the trooper from Kansas. "Excuse me, sir. But the Mahdists are on their way. A column from the north."

---

Ishtar Singh beamed and rubbed his hands together. "So, fine, fine. Zach, please get the troops ready immediately." He turned to the Kansan, "Give my compliments to your officers, Mr. Kennedy, and have them move their troops to the west side of the park and be prepared to give support, but not before a flare is fired, please." With a disappointed tone, he continued, "We should talk first, I suppose."

---

Zach entered the tent a half hour later and he found Ishtar Singh rereading the message which the first squad of the 9<sup>th</sup> Jefferson had just brought on their return from Fort Leonard Wood. It requested that Ishtar Singh hold if possible. It was accompanied with a promise of support from all of the militia the governor could gather.

---

"Everybody is ready to go, Ishtar," he said.

---

"Very fine, friend Zach, I wonder if this is the beginning of the last battle with the Mahdists."

---

Zach clapped him on the shoulder, "Let's just hope that we are not the Alamo, old son."

---

As they started to move out, a dusty rider galloped up and saluted. "Jerry Carter is ready for Durrant, sir. He says to tell you that the Columbia and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kansas is a few hours behind me and will be here about noon."

---

Zach grabbed a trooper out of line and told him to wait and lead the new troops to the trading post. He admonished him to be careful and not run into an ambush. The messenger was provided with a fresh mount and ordered to get the troops moving and that there were replacement horses in Bedford, so to hurry. Zach warned him also to watch for an ambush on their way to the town.

---

“Good news, if we can get them all together and not chopped up piecemeal,” he thought.

---

The Bedford troops arrived at the trading post and occupied their assigned positions. Zach joined Leo and Ishtar Singh on the roof where an observation post had been built. Without a word, Leo handed his binoculars to Zach and pointed to the high ground to the north. Along the ridge was a line of riders. In the center was a man with a green turban. A large green flag was held by a rider next to him.

---

“Just like the old movies,” Zach muttered.

---

At that moment a rider carrying a white flag rode down the slope. Two troopers intercepted and relieved him of his weapons. They escorted him to the trading post and brought him in to meet Leo and Ishtar Singh.

---

He saluted and presented an envelope. Ishtar Singh tore it open and read. He handed the note to Leo and said, “Tell Mr. Brock that I will meet him at the foot of the slope in an hour. No more than five.”

---

The Mahdist saluted and left. Leo and the Sikh rejoined Zach. “They want to parlay,” said Leo.

---

“Good, give more time for the others to get here,” answered Zach. “What’s the deal?”

---

Ishtar combed his beard with his fingers. “They want to meet. That was all the message said.”

---

“Well, just stick to the story and delay, delay and delay,” answered Zach.

---

“Leo, my friend, you will be in charge here and be prepared to avenge us if there is treachery. Smite them hard in my memory,” asked Ishtar only half-jokingly.

---

Zach and three troopers accompanied the Sikh to the meeting place. As they approached, a delegation emerged from the Mahdist lines and rode down the slope. Their leader was a round-faced man of around fifty. He had a long beard flecked with gray. Zach would have thought him a drinker by the color of his nose and the broken veins in his cheeks. The green-turbaned man struggled to alight and when he stood, he was only a little over five feet tall, though Zach suspected that he wore lifts in his boots. He carried a short



leather rod with a long horsetail rising from its end that he kept flicking as if he were plagued by insects.

---

“I am Emir Mohammed Farir Caroli,” he said imperiously.

---

Ishtar Singh bowed and stepped forward until they were almost touching and thrust out his hand, “And I am Gyani Ishtar Singh. How do you do?”

---

The Emir was clearly uncomfortable at having the large man towering over him and he turned and retreated to where his men had set up two camp chairs. He waved his switch at one of them and settled in the other. Ishtar Singh gingerly sat in the flimsy chair and stared at his counterpart.

---

Mohammed flicked an imaginary fly from his boot-toe and asked, “What are you doing here in the Caliphate or even in Missouri, may I ask?”

---

Ishtar gave a smile and replied, “We chased a band of reavers, here, to their camp. We executed them and freed the captive women and children. Now we are claiming the abandoned camp as a part of the sovereign State of Missouri, our esteemed ally. Do you not see the flag?” he finished pointing back towards the camp.

---

“No, this is a trading post set up by our revered Caliph. You and your men are here illegally. If you do not remove yourselves, we will be forced to move you. And my government demands restitution for our citizens you have killed.”

---

Ishtar Singh looked puzzled and said to Zach, “Did we kill any Mahdists, my friend? I do not recall such an act.”

---

Zach bowed to hide his smile and replied, “No, Mr. Ambassador, we killed or hung members of the reaver gang, but I do not recall any demised citizens of the Caliphate.”

---

“Come, come,” spat the Mahdist. “There were traders here. Where are they, then?”

---

“Oh, those,” said Zach in feigned surprise. “We did take a few people into protective custody and freed a few slaves, which, as you know, is illegal in the sovereign State of Missouri and the United States of America. They are in Bedford. Would you like me to fetch them?” he finished innocently.

---

Taken aback, the Caliphate representative paused before speaking,

“Yes. I would appreciate the return of my people and their goods. Immediately.”

---

Zach motioned a trooper over and instructed him to organize an escort and bring the prisoners from Bedford and to take their time. He also requested a table and chairs, along with refreshments.

---

Ishtar and Zach made a point of moving off and talking. This delayed the meeting and gave the reinforcements more time to arrive.

---

A light wagon pulled up and the U.S. troopers began unloading. They set the table up and started to arrange chairs. Jason suddenly elbowed a Mahdist and staggered him so that he tripped and fell. He was instantly on his feet and grabbing for the pistol on his belt. Fortunately, the belt had slid around in the fall and was behind the man.

---

There was a general grabbing of weapons and a massacre was narrowly averted when the tableau was frozen by Ishtar Sing’s bellow, “What is going on here?!?”

---

He strode in the midst of the two groups and yanked a rifle out of the hands of Daniel Appleton. “Enough of this. I will end the first man who fires, regardless of who it is. Is that understood?”

---

Mohammed stepped forward. “Your man attacked mine. Unprovoked.” The emir pointed at Jason.

---

Ishtar looked at Jason. “I was trying to set things up and that clown kept getting in my way. I moved him, that’s all,” Jason defended himself. “If I was going to attack him, he would be dead before he hit the ground.”

---

“Mr. Caroli, will you please instruct you people that if they are not going to help, to step back and give my men some room?” Ishtar Singh asked the Caliphate representative.

---

The little man nodded and waved his attendants back. The arrangements were made with no further trouble and the two negotiators resumed their places. While a fire was laid and the coffee brewing, Caroli asked again what the United States was doing in the Caliphate.

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“As I said: we chased a band of reavers who were raiding in the territory of our ally, the sovereign State of Missouri. We had a joint training exercise being executed at the time and we trapped them in their camp, here in

these fine woods by this fine lake. We did what we usually do with these curses on humanity and eliminated them. Some of your people were here and, not knowing their intentions or if they were engaged in an act of dubious legality, we incarcerated them. We had every intention of contacting your government and learning the true intentions of these dubious individuals.”

---

The Emir leaned forward. “This is a trading post. A Caliphate trading post, manned and stocked by innocent traders, licensed, to trade with the settlers in the area around St. Joseph. That these settlers were a band of murderous cut-throats is distressing news. Now that you know, we will expect you to evacuate the premises, returning every one of our citizens to us.”

---

“Ah, my worthy sir, now that there are no ‘peaceful settlers’ left, there is no reason for this contraband trading station. Your people are far to the North. There is nothing here for you. The sovereign State of Missouri, of whom we are most dear allies, has claimed the land lived on by our late, unlamented foes. Should you wish this trading post returned to you, yes, that is most possible. We will remove ourselves to Bedford and settle in at the northern boundary of Missouri which is Highway 2. As I understand, it stretches all the way to Kansas and beyond, so it will form a fine border between our friendly peoples.

---

“As to your people, anyone who desired to disassociate themselves from the Caliphate have been welcomed with open arms to the United States of America or the Sovereign State of Missouri, as they wish.”

---

Emir Caroli rose to his feet. “Gentlemen, this meeting is over. The boundary between the Caliphate is south of Kansas City, both between Kansas and Missouri. Why you are allied to Missouri is beyond my understanding. They have raided into Kansas, Arkansas and against the Sioux, all allies. What do they say about it?”

---

“They are wanting peace and we have, out of the goodness of our hearts, forgiven all trespasses. Missouri has joined the family of civilized nations and in the fullness of time, will become a member of the United States and a bright new star will glow from the field of blue.

---

“But to keep to our main question, the boundary has moved. We have taken the land claimed by the reavers and they indicated most emphatically, before they met their tragic end, that the boundary was the aforementioned

Highway 2. And, since you do not have any presence but this straggly few huts as anything like a settlement AND north of Highway 2, that is obviously the boundary.”

---

The Emir was silent for a moment. He was prepared for a fight with Missouri, but hesitated about taking on the might of the United States. “You may use Bedford as our guests until I have conferred with my government. Do not assume that this will be permanent.

---

“I demand that you will leave this post, return the prisoners and their goods, immediately.” With that he turned on his heel and signaled his men to mount. He swung onto his horse, using a small step-stool, and without a backward glance spurred up the hill.

---

When they returned to the trading post, they found Larry Knowles and Jerry Carter. The 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson and 2<sup>nd</sup> Taos were setting up camp.

---

Zach told Jerry that they were not staying. He and Ishtar Singh filled in the others on the negotiations. Patrick N’Tumbo, leader of the Springfield troop, protested giving up territory, but calmed down when it was explained to him that they could not hold the trading post from a concerted attack, especially if the woods were fired. They quickly dismantled the camp. Larry Knowles rode back to bring his troops to Bedford.

---

They met the Mahdist prisoners on the way and ordered their escort to turn the wagons over to the traders. Zach noticed that there was very little in the way of goods in the wagon.

---

Knowles was instructed to take his troops to Clarinda and have his Rangers patrol from there to Bedford in the east and to Nebraska City to the west until more troops arrived to support them. Larry said that messages had been sent to Gunnison requesting more troops and Kansas had promised to send an additional three troops in the next few days.

---

Jerry Carter was to set up a command post in Leon and patrol east to the area controlled by Durrant and west to Mt Ayr. He was to retreat if attacked by the Mahdists or the reavers and not engage in a pitched battle. As soon as troops became available, they would be used to support and strengthen that border. “You know that we are going to have to go after Durrant and his gang, don’t you?” Jerry asked as he left.

---

Ishtar Singh, Zach and Leo agreed with him and sat over maps late

into the night planning a campaign. The biggest hole in any plan was the availability of troops and whether there was peace with the Ozarks.

---

“Look,” said Leo. “Worst case scenario: We have to watch the Ozarks, the Mahdists decide to dispute our land grab, Durrant attacks and there is need for the Kentucky and Tennessee military to keep a strong force to prevent diseased Illinois, Indiana and Ohio people from swarming into the U.S.

---

“By our best estimates, the Mahdists can field a total army of three thousand. They have to keep an eye on New Africa and the Sioux and, maybe their own eastern border. Durrant has, probably, three to four hundred.”

---

“No, more like a thousand,” interrupted Tommy Castle.

---

“Okay, a thousand. Under my scenario, we would be swamped here. And if we go, there would be no force, except militia units, between here and the Ozarks. We have about five hundred and fifty troops. That’s against four thousand...”

---

Boyce Washington, the Columbia Troop leader, interrupted, “The Mahdists wouldn’t attack us down here. The New Africans would jump all over them.”

---

Leo answered patiently, “This is a worst case scenario that I am talking about. And, we don’t know just how many men the Mahdists have. Let me finish, please.

---

“To patrol and have enough troops to form a solid defense, we need to have pockets of about five hundred troops each at these strong points.” He pointed to Nebraska City, Clarinda, Bedford, Leon, Brookfield and Booneville. “South of Boonville, the militia would have to hold the Durrants, with help from states to the south, if they can get here fast enough. That’s three thousand troops for us against the Mahdists and the reavers. Now, we might get the Sioux to stage a demonstration in the west to keep some Mahdists troops occupied. That still leaves us on an equal footing. In reality, we need to have seven hundred to a thousand in these spots. In case of an attack, those troops would fall back until the ones on either flank could converge.”

---

Zach shook his head and said, “That’s pretty bleak, Leo. Not that I don’t agree with you, but how long would it take to assemble that many

troops? There are enough, scattered around, but the Mahdists know that they would have to attack in the next few weeks before we do manage to get our boys together. There's a couple of hundred in Kansas and another thousand in local militias. We are still a couple of thousand short, really."

---

Ishtar Singh who, until this point had remained silent, placed a large figure in the middle of the Durrant territory. "Here is where we must attack. Eliminate the reavers and we shorten our lines and concentrate our forces. We must do it soon."

---

Boyce asked, "How? We don't even have the men to hold out."

---

The big Sikh tugged on his beard. "That is the rub, I think. What are these reavers like?"

---

Tommy Castle answered, "They're tough. Old man Durrant believed in training and discipline, so these guys aren't the same caliber as the Bully Boys. I'd say they are equal to the Mahdists. They got ambushes all over that country. They got telephones set up for communication and a lot of ammunition. They make their own powder, by the way. We haven't been able to find out where they get the ingredients, but suspect the Mahdists. I have my doubts that we could ambush them like we done the Bully Boys. This would be a straight up fight."

---

Leo stared at the map and asked, "Where are they stationed? I mean, where are their forces concentrated? Can we possibly pick them off piecemeal?"

---

Tommy scratched his scarce beard and answered, "Mostly there's a bunch north of St. Charles, Hannibal, up to Keokuk along the river. Roughly, along I-70 and up towards Moberly. Hannibal is their capitol, like. We have an unofficial meeting place at Centralia at the park on the east side of town. It has water and all and we do some trading and gossiping."

---

Ishtar looked puzzled, "I was thinking that you were at war with the Durrants."

---

Castle colored and shuffled his feet. "Some of the boys in our outfit had friends with the reavers before we started fighting and raiding. We fight if we have to, but we don't raid each other all the time, you know. I don't know, we just meet and ..." He trailed off.

---

Zach lit his pipe and looked at the Missourian. "So, you get together

and swap. Do those boys even want to fight? Are they friends, really?"

---

Tommy cleared his throat and explained, "None of the regular guys wanted to fight or anything. We was hoping that with the kind of stalemate, that everyone could settle down and, you know, just go on living. Both sides are just tired of all the raiding and burning and killing that goes on. Most of us would like to find a chunk of land and put the guns away. I can't hardly explain it, but we grew up with it and would like, you know, some peace or something to raise crops and family."

---

Ishtar, picking up on the thread of thought, interjected, "Would they be interested in negotiating a peace, then? Stopping to raid and live in peace? Join Missouri or make their own country and having no more trouble?"

---

The Missourian perked up. "A lot of them would, but you would have to still fight the hardcases. Durrant and his sons and some of the old gang."

---

"How many?" asked Leo.

---

"Well now, they have about a thousand guys. Most of them want out, say seventy percent. You'd still have three-four hundred agi'n you. But, how would you let them know? The minute Durrant found out, he would start killing the slackers and attack."

---

Zach looked at Ishtar and Leo. "Do you think we could pull off an assassination and get the Durrants? Maybe a couple of the other hard core reavers?"

---

Ishtar turned to Tommy, "Where would these men be living? Can you give us some information about the place, possibly?"

---

"No, I couldn't, but if I'm right, the next patrol is headed by Ed Phleiger. We talked about us both taking off and he might be the ticket."

---

In the next few days, several more troops from Kansas came in with the news that eight troops from Jefferson, Palo Duro and Arkansas were on their way. Ishtar Singh felt that the immediate danger was past and any attack could be handled by the troops that were at Brandon or on the way and he released the Missouri Columbia and the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers, along with Zach and Leo to talk with Ed Phleiger and try to work out something out.

---

Tommy and his men rode out while the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson waited at Columbia. As the days passed, Zach grew increasingly impatient. Several

times he suggested that something had gone wrong and they should mount up and investigate. Leo always managed to calm him down until the pressure of waiting built up again. Finally, after a tense week, the Columbia troop returned and Tommy reported that they had met with Ed and he would think about it and meet them in three days when his patrol circuit brought him back to Centralia.

---

A week later, Zach and Leo sat down with Ed Phleiger and Jackson Briddle, his second in command. The mistrust with which the meeting commenced was soon dispelled when the Durrant men learned that they would not be forced to merge with Missouri.

---

“Though,” Zach said, “you will be hanging out there all alone, if we pull this off. There is nothing to say you can’t form your own state and join us as, say, Illinois or whatever you want to call it. You have a copy of our Constitution and all you have to do is agree to follow it, petition to join and there you are.”

---

“Thanks, Zach, but let’s get through the first part. We sink on that and there just ain’t no reason to talk ‘bout nothing else,” Jackson said.

---

Zach held up his hands in surrender and Leo broke in, “You want to get this thing done, as you say. You know more about your own people than we do. How many do you figure will join us, or at least, remain neutral?”

---

Ed answered, “The capitol, if you want to call it that, is in Hannibal. There are about three hundred men there. Those are what is left of the original mob. Old Man Durrant keeps them close. He’s got boats that he can use to get across the river to escape. He uses them now to raid over there, or he did before the new plague. I do know that there are bunches of supplies and a couple of dozen men guarding them at Quinsippi Island near Quincy. They’ve got a couple of buildings built at the end of the bridge. Two stories to keep them above the water when it floods.”

---

Zach asked, “What about the other units along the river and west of there?”

---

Ed said that those units were mostly to watch out for an attack from Missouri or treachery from the Bully Boys or the Mahdists. They were assigned to farms and ranches in the area and took turns running patrols. “There is a trading post up near Ottumwa that the Mahdists have a dozen or so



men at, but things have been quiet with Missouri getting organized and Illinois being plaguey.”

---

Jackson assured them that the only trouble they would have was with Hannibal and the Quinsippi post after the word had gone out. It seemed that the cream of everything went to Hannibal and the outlying areas were treated as serfdoms. There was a considerable amount of resentment about that and a few of the inhabitants had slipped across the border into Illinois, before the plague, to escape.

---

Leo pressed him on the defenses at the caches on the island and Ed swore that they were ‘tight as a drunk on Saturday night’. Appleton shoved a detailed map across the table and questioned him on what he knew of the island.

---

“Okay, look,” he replied in exasperation, “It don’t do any good to get the supplies because Durrant has it rigged to explode. The minute they ‘spect anything is gone wrong, he pushes a button and the place goes up like the Fourth of July.”

---

Ignoring him, Leo asked, “Have you seen these explosives? What does the detonator look like?”

---

Ed hesitated and admitted that he had never seen the explosives or the detonator, but everyone knew it was there. He finally got down to describing the defensive layout when it became obvious that Leo was not going to drop his plan of taking the island first.

---

Phlieger had been to the cache the year before on a resupply mission and had seen the situation first hand. There were two blockhouses at the end of the bridge, each having a clear field of fire over the denuded flats that surrounded them. The bridge itself was mined (he thought) and there was a large gate at the island end. The rest of the area was fenced with heavy chain-link and barbed wire. A system of collectors and batteries kept the fence electrified. The area inside the fence was thought to be mined.

---

“So, you see? There is just no way for you to take them out.”

---

Zach, who had been sitting back and wondering where Leo was going with his line of questioning, knocked the ashes out of his pipe and leaned forward. “What do you have in mind, Leo?”

---

“I am willing to bet that those supplies are for an emergency getaway.

Let's say they are pressed and have to abandon Hannibal. A bunch of boats at the docks, a quick trip up the river, load the supplies and gone. They probably have a good idea from the Mahdists where to set up again and they're in business."

---

Zach mulled this over while he cleaned and stuffed his pipe. "The only way we would know if the island is mined, is to find out where they keep their mounts."

---

Ed looked puzzled, "What does that have to do with anything?"

---

Leo laughed and explained that if the horses were in the compound, then it would not be mined. If there were trucks, and that meant hard to find fuel, then those supplies might be vulnerable to attack, which would prevent the reavers from taking any more supplies than they could carry. "Either way, they would be leaving a large cache of stuff behind."

---

Ed asked what about the horses being across the bridge on the mainland.

---

Zach interjected that they would simply stampede them and they would have the same problem with moving supplies. "I'll bet you that no one is supposed to know about the supplies or the island or the boats. The only reason we know anything about it is you, Ed. If we attacked the Durrants, all they would have had to do is hold us off until they could get the supplies loaded and the boats ready and we would be sitting on the bank staring after them. Oh, we would probably sink one or two, but most of them would get away and they'd be out there somewhere anxious to be a thorn in our sides. "Here's my idea..." He explained his plan, with input from the Durrant reavers. They broke up in the early hours of the morning with an agreement from Ed to sound out the rest of the discontented reavers.

---

They rode back to Bedford the next day to lay out the plan to Ishtar Singh. They found Rafael and Homer Jackman with six additional troops from Kansas and Arkansas. After a lot of backslapping and friendly insults, they turned in.

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## Chapter 21

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### The Durrants

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*Summer 2053*

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*Well, another move to tighten the noose against the Mahdists. Only time will tell whether they will make more of our eliminating their only allies. Eventually, they will be in a position where they have no trade or a way to get new recruits except by their own efforts. Every month a small number desert them and ask for asylum. Up to this point, we have been steering them to Florida, but Robert's organizers have made contact with some survivors of Lafitte's visit and is trying to organize another state. Leo suggested that they could send them to the Bahamas, since the Israelis reported them as being deserted. Some people are against that since we would have a 'nest of pirates' on our doorstep. Too much for me to figure out. Even the ones who convert away from Islam are not looked upon too well, though most people will give them a chance.*

---

*This plan for taking care of the Durrants is my immediate concern. Tomorrow, I present it to the war council we have established and see what they say. No more big gangs of reavers, now that would be a big step towards organizing the country. Yeah, all we have to do is worry about the plague, New Englanders, New Africans, Ozarkers and any reavers still floating around.*

---

*After this, home and retirement. The only fighting I am going to do in the future is with snowballs!!!!*

---

*The Kansas and Arkansas troops are a Godsend. We can now watch the Mahdists and go after the Durrants.*

---

*Got a letter from Sarah. She says that Lizzy is still on bedrest, but anxious to hear from David. Now I have to stand over him with a ruler while he writes to his wife! That is another reason that I will be happy to quit, being a nursemaid. Well, I had better get it done before they send the next rider to FLW with the mail.*

---

*The council met in the Bedford Fire Station. It started off with a report by Homer on the negotiations taking place between the Ozark and*

Missouri representatives. They all were aware that a successful resolution would free up a considerable number of troops.

---

“As of when I left,” said Homer “they had pretty well agreed on boundaries. There are getting to be more people than there is enough farm and ranch land, they wanted some flatland so they could spread out. We gave them a hunk of Arkansas. Fayetteville, north around the mountains to Searcy, south to I-40 as the boundary. Missouri gave them a piece from Joplin to Cairo. Your old boy, Robert, agreed to send a couple of his people to help them organize into a state and he mentioned something about some areas that need settlers.

---

“The only fly in the ointment was there was a raid by some bunch of Ozark boys designed to mess things up, but they were taken to the woodshed and things cooled down. Looks like the only thing left is to put the icing on the cake. ‘Course that may take months or days, depending on the do-dads they have to shake out.”

---

Ishtar thanked him and nodded to Zach. He pinned up a large map to a board which had been set up. With a pointer, he indicated Hannibal. “Here’s where the bad guys are. We have gotten a promise that the outlying Durrant reavers will remain neutral. They will move into Missouri proper until everything is over. The three or four hundred that are left are not going to surrender if pressed. They will pile into boats and try to escape.”

---

A tap at Quinssippi Island. “This is where their emergency supply dump is located. About twenty, twenty-five miles upstream at Quincy. According to our sources, it is impregnable: rigged explosives, electrified fencing, etc.

---

“The reports from our contact in the camp say that the reavers will hold us off, load the supplies onto waiting boats or pack horses and escape. The one question I have is, where are they going to get enough fuel to run everything? They don’t have the Solar Generator Engine and they, apparently, don’t have the facilities to refine fuel. Also, where would they go? The Mahdists don’t want them since it would cut into their resources, Illinois isn’t safe and they can’t go anywhere else without hitting us or an ally. Gentlemen, I have a feeling that they are trapped or they plan on rowing upstream from Hannibal and the island. Normally, Illinois would be the answer. Their story

will see to it that troops are strung along both sides of the river to ambush them or take them when they try to land. I have a feeling that their plan was to get across the river, cut our lines and bug out into Illinois. They can't do that with the plague.

---

"I sent a scout to the island to see just what the transport arrangements are. The 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers and 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro Rangers should be back in a few days. Meanwhile, I say we get ready for an assault on the Durrants."

---

Rafael flipped his hand up and was recognized. "These reavers that are going to sit back and pick up the pieces. There is going to be around six or seven hundred of them, right? Won't they be behind us when the attacks start? Do we trust them?"

---

Leo fielded the question, "We have had a long conversation about that with Missouri's Columbia troop. Captain Castle is definite that they would like to settle down like their Missouri counterparts have done. The only question is whether they will join Missouri or start their own state. Several of us have talked with them directly and they seem sincere. Now, I'm not advocating that we turn our backs and forget them. We do need some sort of blocking force that can hold them off, if we are wrong. The one thing we have going for us is that they will be concentrated at a location of our choosing and attacking us would leave their women and children exposed.

---

"I suggest that we start moving them into the new border area to Kirksville, around the big lake there. It would be far enough away from the Mahdists and form a buffer against an attack. I admit, we would have to move the near seven hundred men and any families. We could be looking at three to four thousand total. If we take a leap of faith, we should still have about four troops to watch them and they would still be outnumbered seven-to-one."

---

When Rafael asked if they could be disarmed, Castle said that would only precipitate a fight. That they were supposed to trust the allies to the point of giving up their guns was too much to ask. He reiterated his stand that they would be neutral until the outcome was assured for one side or the other.

---

Ishtar Singh asked Zach how many troops would be available for an attack.

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"With the need to keep an eye on the Mahdists and the 'peaceful' reavers, we

will have to commit eight or nine troops, though that would be the minimum and only serve to give us a warning. To fight on all three fronts, we need a lot more, of course. I am betting that the Mahdists will hold off unless they are intent on pushing us out of the Bully Boy territory. And I really don't think the Pfleiger reavers will do anything except sit on the sidelines. However, if we get ourselves whipped, they will undoubtedly join the mop up; they would have no choice, really."

---

"Fine, fine, then we would have eighteen or nineteen troops to smash the Durrants," said the big Sikh. "Oh, very fine." He rubbed his hands in anticipation.

---

"Not quite," said Zach, "we will need a force to block the fifty or so men on the island. That will take a couple of troops, at least."

---

Leo raised a finger, thoughtfully. "Not necessarily, Zach. Why not just blow the bridge? You said the boats are all on the west bank. We find out where they are and have some rangers slip in and sink them or block them from getting out. Then, with the bridge blown and no boats, the island troops are left with the choice of sitting there or taking what they can swim with. Of course, we need a little more info."

---

Zach snorted, "Just a tad."

---

At that point, a disturbance pulled their attention from the subject at hand. Doctor Ferguson had overwhelmed the hapless guard and entered the room. Behind her was Max Trescott of the Kentucky troops, which had been her escort. She pulled off her gloves and whipped the dust from her jeans with her hat.

---

"Gentlemen," she said in her best lecture hall voice. "After a study of this new plague, I am certain it is a short-lived, very virulent strain. The serum that I have with me will inoculate against it, the one developed by Doctor White and his team, to some degree. With the samples I collected, I am sure that I can produce something more effective."

---

Ishtar Singh, with an amused look, replied, "That is very fine news, my good Doctor. But, as you can very well see, we are in the middle of a meeting to plan our course of action against the Durrant gang."

---

Doctor Ferguson snapped back in a vinegary tone, “And you may return to your maps and war games after I am finished. Now, I understand there are people in the vicinity that have not been inoculated. Right?” Before there was a chance to answer her, she charged ahead. “We will need to bring them in for treatment as soon as possible. How many of your troops can I count on?”

---

Leo was trying to stifle his laughter. Zach cleared his throat and looked innocently at the ceiling. The Sikh looked as if he was about to explode. Homer slapped his hand on the table and guffawed, “Looks to me like this feisty, young thing should be the one bossing this herd. Darlin’, when you get tired of these old boys, there is a home for you in my neck of the woods. Criminey, if I didn’t think you could whup me, I’d marry you my own self.”

---

Doctor Elizabeth looked angry and embarrassed at the same time. “Sir, I am not accustomed to being addressed in that manner.”

---

Rather than put the Arkansawyer in his place, he let out another loud laugh and answered, “Well, just maybe you should have been. Just maybe.”

---

Ignoring his hoot of laughter, she turned to Ishtar Singh. “Well?” she demanded.

---

The big Sikh had regained his usual composure and he tried to soothe her by saying, “Doctor. We will be moving the refugees to a very fine place named Kirksville. It has a wonderful lake where, I am very sure, that you have good times for swimings. There you can stick those in need with your very wonderful medicine. I will let you take two more troops who will assure that you will be protected very fine. Is that not a very fine plan? I, too, have a very fine plan for myself. We are arranging for some very bad things to happen to some very bad people.

---

“So, now that we have solved your problem of bringing the some reavers to a place where you may doctor them, will you, please, let us perfect our plans?” He finished with a wide smile splitting his beard.

---

The doctor asked exactly where the refugees would assemble, but before she got her answer, another interruption broke into the meeting.

---

“Daniel. Jason,” shouted Leo as the two men entered the room.

---

They grinned at him and nodded to the rest of the room. "Got news, if I can interrupt," Daniel said. "Probably change any plans that you may have."

---

"Excuse me, Doctor Ferguson, but the two fine men have just returned from a very dangerous scout and need to be heard before they drop from exhaustion," Ishtar Singh said with an endearing smile.

---

"Hey, doc," interjected Homer, "plant yerself right over here next to me." He swung an empty chair around. Indignant, she found a place as far from him as she could. When he let out a loud chuckle, she colored and sat stiffed-back.

---

Daniel, a little confused by the interchange, gave his report. Three days prior, he and the two troops of rangers had crossed the river mid-way between Hannibal and Quincy and, at night, had taken up positions in the latter town. They set up in Sunset Park where they had a good view of the compound. The trees had been cleared on both sides of the road all the unnecessary buildings had been torn down or blown up. A strong chain-link fence with a gate across the road had been built with two large guard towers. There was a two-story cinderblock building set back from the gate. The road entered the gate and ended at a wide space in front of the building. The upper floor was cantilevered over the lower floor, the overhang being about four feet. A stairway led from the ground to the second floor and it was narrow and the risers were unevenly spaced.

---

Jason was drawing a rough rendition of the compound as Daniel spoke. He showed the extent of the area covered by the fence in relation to the rest of the island. He drew in the outbuildings as his brother continued.

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"There are stables or storage sheds from the main building to the fence by the gate. The whole thing encloses the space where wagons would wait to be unloaded," Daniel said. He indicated the area behind the buildings where the horses were kept. A fence of poles kept the animals from wandering into the hundred yard wide space behind the structures, but a path was worn to the turn-around in front of the blockhouse. "If the place is mined, then there is only that path and Carlos Montero and Jackie Slater say it is in full view of the windows at the back of the building."

---

"When they went scouting the back of the place, they found a path that ran down from the back of the fence to the river to where the boats were drawn up



on the bank, but there wasn't a back gate, so there must be a bolthole somewhere. The boats didn't look like they were fitted to take engines."

---

He went on to tell that the gate at the bridge had been open and a wagon was sitting in front of the building. There were a couple of, what looked to be bodies, on the ground and upper walkway. Two reavers had collapsed by the gate and there was no sign of life. The horses and cattle were bawling for food or water. They did see one thing, however. Here, Daniel hesitated and looked at the doctor.

---

"Mr. Appleton, I am a doctor and, while it may be distasteful, I have either heard or seen it before."

---

"You tell him, old gal," hooted Homer, digging the verbal knife in deeper.

---

Daniel cleared his throat. "We saw a couple of naked women on the stairs. They looked to be the only ones who died of violence, they had been shot.

---

"We didn't think it would be a good idea to go in, what with the plague and all. "

---

Doctor Ferguson asked, "Did you get a good look at the reaver corpses? I mean, did you see anything odd?"

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"Ma'am, the whole thing looked odd," replied Daniel.

---

"Young man, please answer my question explicitly: Were there any lesions, swellings or other physical marks on them?"

---

"Well, we don't know how long they were lying there, but there looked like splotches on their faces. Blackish or bluish, dark."

---

With a satisfied look, the doctor stood. "I would be willing to wager that several women had been captured by the reavers and brought back to the camp for obvious purposes. They were infected, carriers not sufferers, and infected the reavers. Some of them died and, maybe, some of them ran. The open gate. I would guess that the poor, unfortunate girls were murdered in revenge or while trying to escape. You gentlemen did not enter the compound, did you?"

---

The guards at the door edged away from Justin and Daniel.

---

Justin looked at her with a little wrinkle of worry on his brow. “No, Doctor, we stayed on our side of the bridge.”

---

Doctor Ferguson waved them out of the room. “Nevertheless, you are going to be thoroughly examined. Now.” She put her head out the door and shouted in a surprisingly loud voice, “Lucy. Emily. “

---

When the two nurses arrived, she ordered them to take the two scouts to the medical wagon and get them ready for a full-body examination. The men’s heads snapped around in panic.

---

“Wait a minute!” they shouted in chorus.

---

She said sarcastically, “Ladies, please don’t frighten them, they seem skittish. Let them undress themselves.”

---

As the two embarrassed troopers followed the giggling nurses out of the building, Homer bellowed out laughter. “Shore wisht I had been there so I could get examined, doc.”

---

Doctor Ferguson walked over to the grinning man who had his feet propped up on the table and chair tipped back. She smiled sweetly, jerked his legs up and spilled him over on his back. “Mr. Whom-ever-you-are, you are a pig,” she said quietly, looking down at him. She turned on her heel and walked off.

---

“You certainly deserved that,” said Leo, helping him to his feet.

---

Homer rubbed the back of his head where it had made sharp contact with the cement floor. “Shore as you was born, I did. I just didn’t think she had it in her to do it. Guess I owe that spunky little gal an apology.”

---

After the general laughter died down, Ishtar Singh signaled Zach to continue. “That changes a lot,” he said. “If the compound is deserted, we can stop worrying about guarding it. I still would recommend that we send a troop to seal the place up and keep anyone out.”

---

Homer raised his hand and interjected, “We should get the bodies cleaned up, too. Doc should be able to give a recommendation on that. You know, we may have to burn everything on her say-so.”

---

“All that worries me at this moment,” Ishtar said, “is that we can bottle up the Durrants in Hannibal. We would not like them to escape and trouble us

again.”

---

Leo broke into the conversation. “This doesn’t really change anything. Whether the compound is full or empty, we still need to look after it and we still need to put a block on the other side of the river or get rid of the Hannibal boats. We still have three or four hundred well-armed and well-trained men to root out of there.

---

“Zach, can we get a couple of the tanks here?”

---

With a shake of his head, Zach answered, “Those things have taken a pretty good beating over the years. It would take too long to get them here and they tend to break down way too often.”

---

“So, it’s just house-to-house fighting, then?” he asked, hoping to be contradicted.

---

“Unfortunately. We are talking about a frontal assault against an entrenched enemy unless they are stupid enough to attack us.”

---

Rafael looked irritated. “Why?” he asked. “I know it would be a pain, but could we not just pen them in and starve them out?”

---

“They have been stockpiling supplies. We would be subject to the usual trench warfare problems. Keeping troops alert, supplied and have enough bodies to contain a raid or sortie. What I know about siege warfare may be limited, but we don’t have the manpower to besiege them unless we call in most of the available troops from every state. The logistics would be pretty hairy and we have crops to tend, herds, day-to-day living. And, just one breakout, and we have them spread all over the countryside raising Hell and it becomes a guerilla war.”

---

Homer asked quietly, “We got enough to do the job?”

---

Zach pinned another paper on the board over the map. With troops to watch the Caliphate and ‘good’ reavers, we will have around eighteen available troops or, roughly, three hundred and sixty to four hundred men. We would barely match their numbers. By my calculations, there should be another fifteen to twenty troops. That means spreading a pretty wide net and hoping we can keep them bottled up until they get here.”

---

Leo quietly asked, "Casualties?"

---

"I figure, oh, about thirty per cent. This is the worst kind of fighting. They will pull back towards the waterfront, laying booby-traps and setting snipers. The Warsaw Uprising was brutal for the Germans in WWII and they had carte blanche to level the place and we don't have artillery. The best we could do is wait for a wind and set fire to the place and the brick and cement building won't burn."

---

The Sikh slapped his palms on the table. "We first must look over the situation up close. Tomorrow, we take everyone and move to Mackay Lake and see."

---

They worked out a tentative plan for the placement of troops. A call was sent to Ed Pleiger to request his people start the trek to Kirksville. The Columbia, 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson, 14<sup>th</sup> Palo Duro and 8<sup>th</sup> Arkansas Rangers were ordered to garrison the town. They were to leave immediately and scout the area and organize the reavers when they started to arrive.

---

Rafael was asked to take command of the northern border and watch the Mahdists. He took with him the 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Kansas Rangers, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Kansas.

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The remaining rangers, under Leo's command, were to set out to study the situation in Hannibal.

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The only exception was the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers. They were to get their inoculations and take control of Quinsippi. Wiring the bridge for explosives was their first priority. If there was an attempt to cross by anybody not connected to the United States or its allies, they were to drop the bridge and use their best judgment on whether to try and defend the facility or escape across the Mississippi. They would have the unpleasant task of collecting the bodies and burning them. After that was completed, they were to take an inventory of the contents of the building and find a map of the minefield. Leo warned his sons that no one was to try to defuse the mines. They were probably from arms depots and therefore were over fifteen years old and might be unstable.

---

The meeting broke up and the commanders let their troops know that they

were moving out in the morning. Gear was checked and the wagons loaded with fresh supplies.

---

Some time in the night, the 6<sup>th</sup> Jefferson (Eagle Pass), 15<sup>th</sup> Jefferson (Gunnison) and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Jefferson (Trinidad) stumbled in. They had ridden as hard as they could, swapping horses on the way. They were in high spirits at not missing the action. These units were usually home guard units, but Al Black had decided that they needed some field experience. Al had come himself as commander pointing out that he needed some field experience, himself. He assured Ishtar Singh that he was placing himself and his troops under the Sikh's command.

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Their arrival freed the 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro Rangers to be added to the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers for the Quinsippi maneuver. The two troops set out to find their way across the Mississippi.

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They moved out just before noon with the doctor and her two Kentucky troops. They set up camp outside of Hannibal in Huckleberry Park. The scouts had reported that there was no activity in the area and probed the outskirts of the town.

---

A defensive position was formed with the remaining troops. Ishtar Singh hoped that the reavers would try a frontal attack and put themselves in a crossfire with the six machine guns set up with overlapping fields of fire. A reserve, made up of the two Kentucky troops, was established at the entrance to the park at McMaster's Avenue. The doctor's wagons were parked there and would serve as a field hospital, if necessary. When she was finished with the inoculations of the troops, she would move on to Kirksville and attend to the reavers there.

---

Doctor Ferguson set up her mobile lab and, with her nurses, began creating vaccine from the samples she had already been working with. The laboratory enabled them to raise cultures in a medium that was developed shortly before the Troubles. It replaced the need for eggs as a medium and was trademarked as FauxEgg by the now defunct drug company. The process to create the culture medium was easily duplicated and Doc White had manufactured several hundred test tubes of the incubation material before the expedition left. They had been stored in the refrigeration unit of the lab. The manufacture

of the vaccine was easily accomplished with the equipment in the mobile lab.

---

Ishtar asked Al Black to take command of the troops in an arc from the Mississippi river to the command post. He gave command of the right arc to Dan Monroe of Arkansas. Neither was to initiate an attack, but were to defend themselves if necessary.

---

During the first night an attempt was made to infiltrate the town from the waterside, but failed due to the vigilance of the reavers. One trooper of the 7<sup>th</sup> Kansas Rangers was killed and two other wounded before the raid was called off. They were able to identify the area where the boats were kept and a machine gun was assigned to cover the area.

---

After this, they waited, hoping for some movement on the part of the reavers. Ishtar Singh, though always ready for a fight, was reluctant to order the troops into the town. He wanted to give the reavers several days for the nervous tension to build and hoped they would snap and attack.

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### Quinsippi

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*Summer 2053*

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The Jefferson and Palo Duro Ranger units crossed the Mississippi and turned north on Illinois 57. There had been more burning since the last time they had ridden up this road. The destruction seemed random and senseless. It was almost a mad pattern of alternate pyromania on one side of the road and then on the other. Buildings across the road from each other were not burned. At other sites, it seemed only two-story structures were safe, but single-story buildings were torched.

---

There were no animals to be seen the whole way. Something had frightened them off. Gregg opined that it could have been the fires. Timothy Tobias hoped it was not a sign that there were reavers waiting in ambush. With that, Daniel ordered a more careful advance, which slowed them down.

---

It took them two days to ride the twenty-five miles to Quinsippi. The town had been spared from the pyromaniacal destruction further south. At the Maine Street bridge, they found bodies, swollen in the summer sun. As far as Jordan Zales and Joel Michael Mahon, the medics, could tell, they had been killed by the plague. With gloved hands, they moved the five bodies to the river and slid them in. Both bridges across the river had been blown and were unusable. The closest road crossing was Keokuk, IA to the north or Louisiana, MO to the south. The Hannibal bridge had been blown, also. It looked to Daniel like the reavers were placing a large amount of trust in their boats.

---

They crossed over Bay Bridge road and advanced north in eerie silence. With advance riders, they moved up Bonansinga Drive. The silence continued with only the sound of a few birds. Henry Gage almost let off a burst when a squirrel leapt from a tree in front of him and scurried across the street.

---

The 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro turned on Cedar Street and made their way to Sunset Park to establish camp while the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson continued on to the Quinsippi Island

Road. Daniel posted four men to cover the eastern end of the road and two to hold the horses. “Sly” and Tom Ford advanced until they were able to get a good view of the west side of the bridge.

---

After a careful sweep with their binoculars, the two waved the remainder of the troop forward. Daniel took his time to conduct his own observation. Nothing looked changed except that some animals had been at work on the bodies and a small flock of carrion birds was, as Leo put it, ‘fulfilling their role in nature’.

---

Daniel motioned Gregg to take the third squad and move up to the gate. There was a rush of feet as they advanced. The stench was thick and the two troopers near the bodies were sick. An inspection of the guard posts at either side of the gate proved them empty with a litter of leaves and animal droppings.

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Jimmy Gunderson’s first squad advanced next and leap-frogged Gregg’s men and advanced to the wagon and against the building. They made a quick reconnaissance around the building, keeping to a beaten path and gave the all clear.

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Daniel brought Jason’s squad with him and ordered it to make a sweep of the out buildings. When Jason returned, he reported that the animals in the pens were in poor shape, but there was no one around.

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Finally, Jimmy was sent up the stairs to look over the second story. Jimmy Chin and David Benton crept up the stairs and raised their eyes slowly above the level of the window sills. David immediately dropped, pale and wide-eyed. Jimmy called down, “There’s nobody alive up here. If there were, they would have to have the strongest stomach known to man.”

---

Daniel ordered Jason’s squad to see about the animals and if any could be saved. Gregg was assigned to find a safe spot to make camp. He sent two troopers to the 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro with orders to leave a squad at the park and bring the rest across to the compound. Daniel then turned to Jimmy with an apologetic look, “Have your guys drop their gear and start the cleanup. I’ll get the 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro started on digging a mass grave. Let me know how many bodies there are so I can get an idea how big.”

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When the Tobias brought his two squads in, Daniel sent one out to scour the town for plastic sheeting or tarps. Jimmy had already discovered that the corpses were fragile and couldn't be lifted. The other squad started a grave on the south side of the road on the Quincy side.

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Daniel made sure that everyone was involved in the distasteful task of moving the bodies or digging the grave. As the bodies were stacked, they were covered. There was a sigh of relief when the job was done and the smell began to dissipate. Daniel announced he would conduct a prayer service at the gravesite for whoever was interested.

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It was a tired crew that settled down that night. Few ate very much, whether from weariness or nausea. There was little talk and the troopers soon settled down. Daniel called the leaders together and outlined the next day. He called for a report on the condition of the animals.

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Jason said he had managed to save most of the animals, though it was touch-and-go. Those that were too weak to survive were given over to the cooks. The dead animals and the carcasses were thrown into the river after a hole had been smashed in the back of the stables and an opening cut in the fence.

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Jimmy brought up that there was evidence of fifty men garrisoning the facility, but only forty-three bodies were found. "Also, it looks like one of the boats is missing and several sets of oars. There must be some survivors that took to the river."

---

Alex Neubaum, the radio operator, managed to get the command center at Hannibal and warned them that reavers from Quinsippi may be on the loose.

---

The next morning, Gregg's squad relieved the Palo Duros at Sunset Park and everyone began the process of sorting out the supplies in the buildings. Castro Aldo found a map of the minefield in a desk upstairs. There was a board wired to the explosives that Bob Harkless managed to disconnect. With the booby traps disarmed, there was a general sigh of relief.

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They sorted the supplies into sections and, realizing that they couldn't possibly haul all of them away, Daniel ordered two squads to scout the town

and outlying areas for transportation. There was a wealth of material from weapons and ammunition to uniforms to dried food and canned goods to medical supplies.

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“There is enough to supply a good-sized community for months,” observed Timothy Tobias.

---

“Yeah,” answered Daniel. “With this stuff, they could set up a new base if they didn’t want to stay here. Maybe, before the plague, this would have been a new base of operations into Illinois.”

---

Kanwaljit Singh, the 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro medic, laughed as he sorted through the medical supplies for his unit, “Well, boys, it is ours now and we can certainly use it. Though some of these medicines I found in the refrigerators are marked ‘experimental’ and I wouldn’t want to use them on anybody I liked. They have got to be pretty old unless the reavers have a research facility around here.”

---

Three days later, everything was loaded and they were ready to go. There was still some room in the wagons and Daniel allowed the troops the rest of the day to search the town for ‘souvenirs’. Though the town had been gone over by the reavers, most of the troopers managed to find something of interest. Mike Stacey took a lot of ribbing when he showed up with several boxes of old comic books in protective sleeves. “Come on,” he defended himself, “there are some great ones here. First issue.”

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They began their trek at dawn the following day and headed south. The plan was to cross over at Louisiana, Missouri. It was about one hundred and ten- or twenty-miles and should take a week. Once there, they would cross the bridge and wait for orders.

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### End of the Durrants

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*Summer 2053*

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*This is a real stomach churner. I remember the time that we sat behind prepared defenses and the Mahdists attacked us. At Mitchell, Louisiana, Mississippi. It was a slaughter. I am pretty sure that we won't do the charge thing, but we also lost a few when we attacked a set position, as at that town at the Nebraska/Colorado line, Peetz, I think. Nothing good will come of this except to get rid of the last organized reaver gang we know of. There will be a lot of dead kids when this is done.*

---

*I don't think Ishtar's war of nerves will be very successful. They know we are here and about how many and they know that we will have to spend a lot of blood getting them out. I am really surprised that they haven't already bugged out. They can't think they will be able to hold on. Maybe it's the Clinton Cavalry riding up and down the far bank that is stopping them from taking to the boats.*

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*On a lighter note, we are going to have to marry Doc Ferguson and Homer Jackman or keep them separated. Every time they are in the same room, sparks fly. She has given up trying to embarrass him and is in a real war of words. Fortunately, she is about a day away from finishing the injections. Apparently the process of manufacturing the vaccine is not just one of adding a drop of this and that. Even though she has plenty, she has sent to Mitchell for more of the FauxEgg medium due to the long shipping time. I hope it gets here before the plague does or the reavers at Kirksville will be in real trouble.*

---

*Officers call. Gotta run.*

---

*"Looks pretty quiet," observed Homer as he swept the town with his glasses from a small rise.*

---

*Leo snorted. "Something has to give soon. Either they attack or we do. We are going to have to start begging for supplies pretty soon. Unless we can capture some cattle, of which there are very few, or drive a herd in from someplace,*

we are going to have to start punching holes in our belts.”

---

Ishtar Singh sighed and lowered his glasses. “We will have to attack, gentlemen. Much to my regret.”

---

Rafael held up his hand. “Did you hear that? Sounded like gunfire.”

---

Everyone paused to listen but the sound did not repeat itself. After a few minutes conversation resumed. Leo observed, “It looks like there may be fewer buildings toward the east end of this poor town. With the few shoulder rockets we may be able to force a pathway to the river by blasting the buildings in between and cut the town in two.”

---

Rafael interrupted the banter. “White flag. One o’clock.”

---

They all swung their glasses to where a rider with a flag was halted by the 4<sup>th</sup> Jefferson Ranger on picket duty. After a brief conversation, one of the troopers mounted and rode hard for the command post. He slid off his horse and reported that there was plague in the city and the Durrants were asking for help.

---

He was ordered to get back to his post and keep the other troopers segregated. Ishtar Singh walked towards the sentry who was standing a bored guard duty by the mounts. Stopping twenty yards away, he called, “Trooper. There is a great problem here. You will ride very fast to the doctor. Tell her she must come immediately, but no closer than where you stand. Hurry, now,” he finished at the blank look the trooper gave him.

---

“We are in quarantine, my friends,” he said as he turned back to the small group. “Those troopers down there are also in quarantine. I think we know where the rest of the garrison at Quincy went. Daniel had reported that the numbers were not matching. ”

---

A few minutes later the doctor rode up on the trooper’s horse. She climbed down and called to them for the situation. Ishtar bellowed back that there was plague in Hannibal and that the guards and the command staff may have been infected. Ferguson pursed her lips in thought.

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She called back, “Can I get a sample to see if this is some new strain?”

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“Doctor,” the Sikh yelled back, “it would be possible that some of the men

from Quinsippi have done this work for us. There were some not adding up to the expected number.”

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“Do I have your permission to issue orders?” she asked.

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“Freely given, fair lady,” grinned the Sikh. Homer was heard muttering something about nobody daring to stand in front of that train.

---

Within an hour the medical laboratory wagon had pulled up near the 4<sup>th</sup> Jefferson Rangers who had come in contact with the Durrant rider. The reaver was on the ground at this time, having collapsed. The doctor, masked and gowned, took blood samples and gave them to Lucy Duggan. After a few minutes she called to the doctor. Elizabeth stood and removed her gloves and mask. She spoke to Jerry Carter and a barrier was constructed at the edge of town. Doctor Ferguson and Jerry Carter were bending over the Durrant rider. Emily came out of the wagon and gave an injector to the doctor. She administered the shot and looked up towards town.

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“This is frustrating,” muttered Zach. “What is going on down there?”

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Another figure appeared and called out to the doctor. She immediately entered the medical wagon and returned with a kit and the two nurses. Jerry began to protest, but was ignored by the trio. He looked up at the hill and gave a gesture to show his helplessness.

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He finally picked up the short-range radio and, after banging it against his hand, got through. “She is going into town. There is a full blown epidemic and most of the reavers are down.”

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“Do not let her go in alone,” answered Ishtar. “She must have some protection. We do not want her to be used as a hostage.”

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Jerry waved his understanding. He turned and apparently ordered a squad of the 4<sup>th</sup> Jefferson to accompany the three women.

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“That would be one way to end this thing,” said Homer. “With her as a hostage, she would have them begging to surrender in a couple of hours.”

---

Jerry came up the hill and ordered the medical supply wagon and the two Kentucky troops moved to the barrier. He rode to the command post and spoke to Ishtar Singh, “Apparently, a couple of the guys from Quincy made it

down river and reported the outbreak to Old Man Durrant. They infected the town and, before anyone knew, they had a lot of people down from their own outbreak in Hannibal. About that time they got the rumor that we were heading here and they were trapped. They have been hoping that we would not attack, since most of them are down with the plague. The first thing Old Man Durrant did this morning before he died was to shoot the carriers.

---

“Like Leo said, they had planned on heading into Illinois, but the plague cut that off. Now, with so many sick, there aren’t enough healthy enough to load the supplies and man the boats. And, when the old man got sick, his boys are keeping everyone in town to fight us off cause he was too sick to move.”

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Ishtar Singh asked, “How many are fit? Did they say?”

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“Naw, but there can’t be many. The Durrant rider himself could barely stay on his horse. Doc doesn’t think he will survive. The vaccine came too late. They are asking for help.”

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With a wide grin splitting his beard, the Sikh replied, “Tell them that anyone who wishes our help may pay for it by surrendering themselves to our generous care. Be sure they understand that we will sit here and shoot anyone who tries to escape, either overland or by water. They have a choice: let the plague kill them oh, so painfully or we will kill them and end their suffering or they can be cured by our very fine doctor. Ride fast to tell them before the good doctor ruins my fine plan by curing them all.”

---

Three hours later, a white flag was waved at the head of a column of men, women and children. The 4<sup>th</sup> Jefferson Rangers were escorting them to the houses that Doctor Ferguson as designated as quarantine centers. She said something to Max Trescott and he and his men moved into town. They returned with reavers too ill to move on their own. Elizabeth and her nurses began inoculating the survivors at once but, as she reported later that evening, there would be very few living in the morning.

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“They waited too long for the inoculations to do much good,” she said wearily. “Their survival will depend on their being able to fight off the infection and, so far, that is only happened in about five percent of the cases I have seen personally or heard of.”

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She was speaking from the makeshift hospital. The dead were being wrapped and moved to another house that had been turned into a temporary morgue. When the disease had run its course, the house would be fired, along with the rest of Hannibal.

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Leo spoke with one of the reavers and found out that the four Durrants were dead, killed in the short gun battle. They had wanted to hold out, but their frightened followers had insisted on surrender. The original rider and his partner had come out on their own.

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When Ishtar asked if the supplies stored in the town could be retrieved, Doctor Ferguson gave her permission. The virus was short-lived, but the town should be fired to prevent the spread of the disease through rats or fleas. Her opinion of the sanitary conditions was unprintable.

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All but twelve of the reavers had died. Those had been moved and the town of Hannibal burned. Lucy, one of Doctor Ferguson's nurses had come down with mild symptoms, but was recovering. The supplies were loaded on wagons and driven to a field outside of town. The troopers who loaded or drove were stripped, their clothes burned and they were issued a strong soap.

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In the midst of this operation, the delegation from the Ozark conference rode up. They brought with them the Missouri troops and several from the new state of Ozark.

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While the troopers were shown their bivouac area, Robert Agnello, Gabrielle, John Benson and Charley Tess joined the command staff. They sat at camp tables overlooking the smoking ruins of Hannibal. Before they could get comfortable, the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers were spotted driving into camp.

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They would have arrived earlier, but they had to contend with breakdowns. The wagons they had managed to find to haul the supplies for Quincy had broken down with frustrating regularity. As it was, one wagon had a large limb instead of a wheel.

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Robert introduced Charley as the military attaché from the Ozark government. The tall, thin mountaineer nodded and said, "Howdy, t'all." Agnello then brought them up to date on the negotiations, "We now have a new request for statehood. Actually, two. Missouri and Ozark, though there is still some

question on what we call them. Ozarkers. Ozarkians. Ozarkists.”

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When the laughter died, Charley put in, “Don’t know ourselves, for that matter. We’ll figure somethin’ out.”

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Leo asked, “What’s next? The Durrants are gone. The Bully Boys are too. The Mahdists have made a few noises, but backed off. The neutral Durrants are inoculated and about half of them want to cross the river and set up in Illinois and start a government. Their first move will be ask for Quincy and base their operations there.”

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“That will put the final barrier to the Mahdists,” observed Zach. “With Pfeiffer allied and settling to the east of the Caliphate, there will be no place for them to go. And they can’t move there first because of the plague. The doc says that she will be working on a cure, but is doubtful that there is anything they can do with this strain any more than they could with the other strains that showed up.”

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Benson asked, “When do you gentlemen plan on heading home? Not that we are trying to get rid of you, but I know that you have been here for a while. The 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. will escort the doctor to Kirksville and assist her in the inoculations.

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“Max, we appreciate your help and protection of the good doctor and her nurses.”

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Ishtar Singh stirred and answered him, “This very morning I have received a very important message from Gunnison. Mr. Robert, you will please provide some of your very fine staff to work with Mr. Pfeiffer on setting up the State of Illinois or whatever beautiful name they chose for that wonderful state. I am to send three troops to explore Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and wherever else they may want to roam.

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“Gunnison is wondering how far east the Mahdists have colonized and who is left anywhere. Years ago, the Mahdists had a presence south of Chicago where they were fighting the New Africans. Are they still there or have the two of them fight until there is no one left? I am personally thinking that the plague was the reason the two have stopped fighting.

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“So, when I asked for volunteers, my fine boys from Palo Duro and your



sturdy boys from the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. troop will escort the very fine doctor. And Mr. Trescott offered to ride with my fine boys to explore. Mr. Trescott asked only that the Doctor not be involved. Of course, I spoke with them first with much encouragement. As soon as we return to Jefferson, there will be replacements, also eager to explore a new world, who will relieve them. I have assigned the 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson to training duty for the Illinois colonists.”

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Leo looked at Zach. “Cathy will be unhappy about that and the girls, too. Especially Elizabeth, of course. Do you just want to say here and babysit her husband or go all the way back home for a day or two until her tantrums and poutings get you sent back?”

---

Karl refused to have him transferred to another unit so he could go home. He was afraid it would lead to charges of nepotism. As he put it, “If we gave in to every wailing wife or mother or father, we wouldn’t have anyone for these expeditions except orphans with no friends. Elizabeth and David are going to have to get used to this, especially if David wants his own unit.”

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One more little issue rose after things settled down. Zach was approached by Emily Ducot and Lance Jordan from the 7<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Rangers and asked that he marry them as soon as possible. Emily was a small, thin girl and the reason for the haste was obvious. Lucy stood up as Maid of Honor and Max Trescott as the Best Man. The reading of the banns was suspended. Zach promised to carry a letter from Emily to her family.

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Since Emily would be accompanying the medical team to Kirksville, Lance was transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. on a temporary basis until he and Emily returned to Mitchell and he was assigned to unit there.

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## Chapter 24

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### Homeward Bound

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*Fall 2053*

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*Thank God we didn't have to take Hannibal by storm. I did not relish that at all. We probably would have lost a lot of men doing it, like Leo or someone said, they weren't like the Bully Boys. No ambush would have likely succeeded. Now our emphasis will be finding the eastern border of the Caliphate and sealing it off. Once that is done, we (that's the royal 'we' not the personal) will send a larger expedition into Ohio and Indiana to get those territories organized. But, that is for another day.*

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*Another wedding. I hope that that is the last official act I will ever have to perform. Max was unhappy at losing his troop leader, but not having to escort the good doctor more than made up for it. Homer decided to accompany the medical team to Kirksville to 'observe'. I had better get out of here before the joke about getting those two married becomes a reality.*

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*I wonder what is happening with the East Coast. I know that the states are getting organized, but what kind of trouble are they having with the New Englanders? That's another group we will have to seal off, though we set that in motion.*

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*With Ozark organized and asking for statehood and Missouri and Kentucky we are getting this old country started again. From what I understand from Robert, getting states to join is not the problem on the East Coast, but slowing them down enough to get organized and set up with a constitution is. He says there are several clamoring to join. With the borders being a little 'soft', that is one issue they will have to solve before statehood. Not my problem.*

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*Poor old Ishtar: not a battle in sight. I'm not sure whether his disappointment is real or if he feels that he have to live up to some persona that he has built for himself. When I point out that we did have a fight against the Bully Boys, he looks at me with sad eyes and says 'that was a spanking of*

*bad little children, not a battle'.*

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*Leo and I have been making plans for our 'retirement'. Once I get home and reintroduce myself to my family, get the place in shape (not that there is any worry about that with Eduardo and Ed there) and resign from every post, job or position I have with Jefferson or Gunnison and disconnect the phone, I will bundle Sarah up and find a spot for a long vacation. That is one woman I do not deserve!!!! After that, I will spend the rest of my life raising kids and livestock.*

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*However, before that I have to get home and tomorrow we start.*

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The 1<sup>st</sup> Jefferson Rangers set out to Kirksville with the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. and the medical team. The two Kentucky troops with the 1<sup>st</sup> Palo Duro Rangers were supplied and rode east at first light. They were to cross into Illinois and scout towards the northeast with the purpose of mapping the boundaries of the Caliphate and New Africa. They were to send coded reports when able. Once this was accomplished, they were to link up with any Gunnison organized communities. Where ever possible, they were to make contact with any groups they discovered along the way and leave copies of the constitution. The location of those interested would be transmitted to Robert Agnello for further action.

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Ed Pfeiffer and his settlers were to be supplied and move across the river when they had been inoculated. Their first task would be to repair the Bay Bridge at Quincy for wheeled traffic. They were accompanied by one of Robert's team for their push into Illinois. Wayne Gates would see that they were organized and ready for statehood. In a surprise move, Charley Tess asked if a troop from Ozark could join them. He wanted them to benefit from the training and there would probably be several families from Ozark that would join the Pfeiffer band in Illinois. He also asked if another troop could join Gregg Appleton when he passed through. The reason he gave was overpopulation in the Ozarks and this would help pick territory for the immigrating families.

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The rest of the troops headed home. The Arkansas and Ozark troops took the road south, the Tennessee contingents rode east and the rest formed

for Fort Leonard Woods.

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Enough vaccine went with the eastward troops to begin inoculating their populations. Doctor Ferguson promised that she would send more as soon as she reached Jefferson and could get production ramped up.

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They spent three days being hosted by John Benson, repairing wagons and re-shoeing their mounts. They were well on their way to Seldon when they got the news that Texas had petitioned for statehood and been accepted by the Congress. Through the fuzzy reception, they learned that they had a fifteenth star for their flag. Robert sent back the news that they had a petition from Ozark and Missouri.

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“The flagmakers are sure going to get rich, if this keeps up,” commented Leo. Zach laughed and replied, “Maybe we should petition for statehood, ourselves. You could be governor of Lakeland and me of Ranchland.”

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Leo looked horrified. “What about our retirement? Being governor would be more work than running these little operations we have been stuck with these last few years.” He gave a simulated shiver of horror.

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At Seldon they bid good-bye to Rafael and the Kansas troops. He invited them to visit for a few days, but they were anxious to press on for home. When Robert, Ishtar and the Palo Duro troops split at the Gunnison turnoff, Leo and Zach felt they were almost home.

---

When the Mound came in sight, the troops rode off whooping and shouting. The wagons proceeded at a more sedate pace and found a large welcoming committee waiting for them when they pulled up in the square of Mitchell. A message had gotten through and most of the citizens of The Lake and The Ranch were present. Leo and Zach were swamped by their families. They finally freed themselves and reported to Carl, officially turning over expedition and troops to him. They filed their reports and had a beer at the troop mess before rejoining their families for the trip home.

---

It was dark before they arrived but Eduardo had an elk and a bear on the barbecue and the fixings for a feast ready. The Appletons stayed until morning and the welcome home party lasted late into the night. Leo and

Eduardo played their guitars and the rest sang snatches of the songs as they remembered them.

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The only person not taking part in the festivities was Elizabeth. She sat in a corner rocking her baby. Zach, standing by the bar, had a troubled feeling about this whenever he looked at her.

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When Sarah gave little Karl to Carrie Stemple and she and Henrietta took Lizzie into the bedroom, his heart sank and Leo gave him a sympathetic shrug of his shoulders. A few minutes later they heard a wail from Elizabeth and calm murmurs from the older women.

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A tense few minutes passed where the crowded living room became quiet and all eyes were directed at the bedroom door. It crashed open and Lizzie, tears streaming down her face, came running out and threw herself in Zach's arms. He barely had time to put down his drink before she crashed into him.

---

"Oh, Uncle Zach. How could you? David's out there and he may get hurt! You have to bring him back. You have to."

---

Trying not to get angry, Zach looked over her shoulder at a tight-lipped Sarah. She marched up to the little tableau and grabbed Lizzie's arm. "Young lady, you had better start growing up. Zach is not, I repeat not, going chasing off after your husband. Every one of us here has had to go through what you are going through. Cathy Appleton has three sons wandering off who knows where. Is she whining and crying? Is she making a spectacle of herself?

---

"I am certainly getting sick and tired of your selfish, petty, immature tantrums and, if they continue to disrupt the rest of us..."

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"You will be asked to find another place to live," finished Henrietta sternly.

---

Lizzie stared at her stepmother and mother-in-law with a shocked look. In fact, everyone had the exact same look. Sarah had always been a strong disciplinarian, but never had they seen her angry like this and no one expected agreement on expelling them from The Ranch from Henrietta. She continued in a calmer tone, "Now, Lizzie. I want you to go home and think

about this. We will take care of little Karl for the night. In the morning I will expect to know what your decision is. And, we will hear no more nonsense about Zach running off and protecting a quite capable young man like David. Is that understood, young lady?"

---

The young girl looked confused at this turn of events and darted glances between Zach and Sarah and Henrietta. She walked to the door with sagging shoulders and left. When Zach started to say something, Sarah took him firmly by the arm and said, "Shall we dance?"

---

The next morning, Leo and Zach were sitting on the porch watching the sun rise, smoking and drinking coffee. Lizzie opened the door of her home and slowly walked across the yard. She was pale and there were dark smudges under her eyes, which were red from crying.

---

When she got to the foot of the stairs she stood shifting from foot to foot. Finally, she looked at Zach and said in a small voice, "I'm sorry, Uncle Zach. Please forgive me for acting like I did."

---

Zach jumped off the porch and gave her a hug and answered, "It's all right, little one, and everything will be fine."

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She gave him a kiss on the cheek and leaned her head on his chest and cried for a few minutes. Zach handed her a clean handkerchief and she gave a tearful little laugh, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. He turned her around and gave her a little shove towards Henrietta standing on the Wetherby front porch holding little Karl. Lizzie hesitated a moment then walked over and took her son. Henrietta put her arm around Lizzie's shoulders and led her into the house.

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Zach returned to his seat with a contented look on his face. Leo leaned over and whispered, "Looks like our retirement just started, spudly."

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